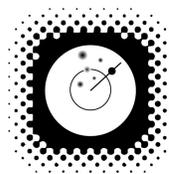


# Morocco



## Overview

Internet access in Morocco is, for the most part, open and unrestricted. ONI testing revealed that Morocco no longer filters a majority of sites in favor of independence of the Western Sahara, which were previously blocked; however, a small number of blogging platforms and anonymizers were found to be blocked.

The filtration regime is not comprehensive, that is to say, similar content can be found on other Web sites that are not blocked. On the other hand, Morocco has started to prosecute Internet users and bloggers for their online activities and writings.

## Background

The ascension of King Mohammed VI to the throne in 1999 marked the end of the “Years of Lead,” a period of state repression under his father, King Hassan II.<sup>1</sup> Despite the taboos broken and journalistic hopes raised since then, the nation’s media continues to face harassment, censorship, prosecution, hefty fines and jail time for “offending” the king, the monarchy, the nation, territorial integrity (particularly in respect to the Western Sahara), God, or Islam.<sup>2</sup>

Examples include the shutting down of a weekly Arabic newspaper, prohibiting media coverage of trials and demonstrations, restricting the movement of the press and blocking certain websites.<sup>3</sup> Reporters Without Borders ranked Morocco 122nd out of 173 countries in their 2008 press freedom index.<sup>4</sup>

Morocco faces two major issues that inform its actions regarding the press and human rights in general: the status of Western Sahara and terrorism. As to the first issue, Morocco has vied with the Polisario Front for control of Western Sahara ever since Spain pulled out of the region in 1976.<sup>5</sup> Morocco asserts a historical claim on the region,<sup>6</sup> while the Polisario Front asserts the right of self-determination.<sup>7</sup> After decades of fighting, both sides agreed to a UN-sponsored ceasefire in 1991 that required an eventual referendum on independence in the region.<sup>8</sup> As of yet, this referendum has not been held.<sup>9</sup> Despite the ceasefire, reports of overzealous suppression of peaceful resistance to Moroccan rule persist.<sup>10</sup> Journalism on the subject has been restricted as well.<sup>11</sup>

## 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 \$).....	4,555		
Life expectancy at birth (years).....	70.4		
Literacy rate (% of people age 15+).....	52.3		
Human development index (out of 177).....	126		
Rule of law (percentile).....	51		
Voice and accountability (percentile).....	29		
Digital opportunity index (out of 181).....	68		
Internet users (% of population).....	32.6		

As to the second issue, terrorism, Casablanca was the site of a major terrorist attack in May 2003 when suicide bombers detonated five bombs targeting a Jewish community center, a Spanish restaurant and social club, a hotel, and the Belgian consulate.<sup>12</sup> An anti-terrorism law which was passed soon after the attacks placed further restrictions on the press.<sup>13</sup>

**Internet in Morocco**

Even though the Internet was first introduced in Morocco in 1995,<sup>14</sup> the Moroccan Ministry of Industry, Trade and New Technologies stated in April 2008 that as few as 3.4 percent of the population had a computer, only 2,000 Moroccan schools were equipped with ICT, and only 10 companies engaged in e-commerce.<sup>15</sup> The Ministry, describing these numbers as “alarming,” announced that it had devised a short-term priority plan of action to promote competition in the ICT field.<sup>16</sup> The International Telecommunication Union estimated the 2008 Internet penetration rate at 32 percent,<sup>17</sup> and an October 2007 UNDP survey indicated that Internet usage in the region as a whole has remained low due to low incomes, high costs, and a lack of interesting content.<sup>18</sup>

Statistics from the National Telecoms Regulation Agency (ANRT) in 2007

reflected the impact of deregulation of the telecom market with double-digit growth for the information and communications technology (ICT) segments on the whole. High-speed (ADSL) Internet services alone sparked unprecedented growth in Morocco’s Internet market, which grew from 168,000 subscribers in June 2005 to 480,000 in June 2007 – an increase of 220 percent. The country’s three providers – Maroc Télécom, Méditel and Wana – also launched 3G Internet services with speeds of over 3 MB in the country’s major cities for USD73 per month (lower speeds are available, starting at 512 Kb/s for approximately USD25 per month).<sup>19</sup>

Maroc Télécom, the largest Internet service provider (ISP) in Morocco, offers wholesale services to other ISPs, following the Reference Access Offer approved by the Morocco’s telecom regulatory body, the National Telecommunications Regulatory Agency (ANRT), in October 2006.<sup>20</sup> Maroc Télécom is a 53 percent subsidiary of European telecom giant Vivendi International and owns 51 percent of the historical telecommunications operators of Mauritania, Burkina Faso, and Gabon.<sup>21</sup>

ICT growth was largely dominated by a 553 percent increase in 3G Internet services provided between June 2007 and June 2008. In fact, 3G Internet services

accounted for 24 percent of the total market share, compared with 74 percent for ADSL broadband Internet. Maroc Télécom held a 76 percent market share in 3G Internet services, relative newcomer Wana with 18 percent, and Méditel with 4 percent. With regard to Internet use overall, the number of subscribers exceeded 650,000 – a 37 percent increase from June 2007.<sup>22</sup>

The ANRT expects that the telecoms industry's share of the country's gross domestic product will grow from the current 7 percent to 10 percent in 2010.<sup>23</sup> The kingdom also set up its first fund to promote innovation in IT as part of a larger plan to create more than 30,000 new direct job opportunities in ICT industries.<sup>24</sup>

In 2006, Morocco's existing blogosphere grew exponentially due to cheaper Internet access, ADSL availability, and the greater availability of Arabic-language blogging platforms such as *Maktoob* and *Jeeran*. In 2006, a local platform called *Blogs Jahiz* was created,<sup>25</sup> adding to popular existing platforms such as Blogger, Wordpress, Skyblogs, and those previously mentioned. As of 2008, the local blogosphere was estimated to contain around 30,000 blogs.<sup>26</sup>

Though in Morocco the Internet is largely free of filtering, bloggers and forum participants generally avoid “red line” topics such as the Western Sahara, defamation of the royal authority, and defamation of Islam.<sup>27</sup> Still, bloggers in the kingdom state that they are free to discuss almost anything.<sup>28</sup>

### **Legal and regulatory frameworks**

Current laws criminalize criticizing the monarchy or Morocco's claim to Western Sahara.<sup>29</sup> The anti-terrorism bill that was passed following suicide bombings in Casablanca in 2003 grants the government sweeping legal power to arrest journalists or to filter Web sites that

are deemed to “disrupt public order by intimidation, force, violence, fear or terror.”<sup>30</sup> In recent years, the Moroccan government appears to have grown increasingly proactive about shutting down newspapers and imprisoning reporters; in January 2007, Morocco's only monthly magazine written in local dialect was ordered shut down for two months after publishing jokes about Islam and a reporter and editor were given three-year suspended prison sentences.<sup>31</sup> Also in 2007, a journalist was forced to resign as managing editor of a weekly newspaper to prevent the newspaper being forced to pay an impossibly large amount in damages in a libel suit.<sup>32</sup>

In 2007, authorities stated they would seek to reform the press law, but they have continued to imprison journalists, seize newspapers and block Web site access.<sup>33</sup> Though the king has sought to improve his image abroad, he has continued to curb the country's independent media. Under strong regime pressure, judges have regularly convicted a steady stream of dissidents under the press law for reporting on taboo topics such as the monarchy, the army, Islam and independence for the Western Sahara.<sup>34</sup> For this reason, an increasing number of journalists have thought it best to self-censor to avoid any problems.<sup>35</sup> Government authorities have worked with journalists and editors' unions to redraft the press law, but were not inclined to decriminalize many of the chief press offenses that authorized imprisonment of journalists, so efforts failed and no revised draft was submitted to parliament.<sup>36</sup>

The current press law has been used to suppress outspoken online writers. For example, in September 2008, Moroccan blogger and journalist Mohamed Erraji was convicted under article 41 of the Moroccan press law of “disrespect for the king” in an article for Moroccan Arabic-

language news website *Hespress* (<http://hespress.com>) and was sentenced to pay a fine of approximately USD630 and serve two years in prison.<sup>37</sup> Later in the month, however, an appeals court overturned the blogger's conviction on the grounds of procedural irregularities, citing that the initial hearing took place only twelve days after charges were filed, when the law calls for a minimum of fifteen days.<sup>38</sup>

Information related to the independence movement in the Western Sahara continues to be a sensitive issue. When the video sharing Web site YouTube became inaccessible in May 2007 via the state-controlled Maroc Telecom, some Internet users believed the site was blocked because video clips that were critical of Morocco's actions in Western Sahara were posted to the site. Maroc Telecom, however, said a technical glitch was responsible for the site's inaccessibility.<sup>39</sup>

Political decisions are also believed to have been behind clampdowns on media coverage. For example, in May 2008, the ANRT advised the Rabat bureau of Al-Jazeera Satellite Channel that the frequency it used for broadcasting a daily news program that had been covering events in the Maghreb for over eighteen months was being withdrawn because of "technical and legal problems."<sup>40</sup> The sudden and vague nature of the decision, however, suggested that the decision had political motivations.<sup>41</sup>

### **Surveillance**

A February 2008 arrest of an Internet user led many to believe that Moroccan authorities do practice Internet surveillance. The Moroccan user, Fouad Mourtada, was arrested by plain-clothes police and sentenced to three years in prison for creating a false profile of the King's brother on the social networking

Web site Facebook.<sup>42</sup> This case marked the first conviction in the country for an online offense and shocked the blogging community. It also raised questions as to how the police identified the Internet user and whether his IP address was tracked.<sup>43</sup> Mourtada was released 43 days later as the result of a royal pardon issued on the occasion of the Prophet Mohammed's birthday.<sup>44</sup>

### **ONI testing results**

Restrictions on freedom of expression have extended to the Internet in recent years. The government has blocked access to Web sites run by Islamist opposition groups and a few Web-based anonymizers, but it has lifted the ban on a few previously blocked Web sites that advocate for the independence of Western Sahara.

ONI carried out testing of Moroccan Internet service on the principal Internet provider, Maroc Telecom, and the ISP Morocco Trade and Development Services (MTDS). Test results in 2008-2009 found that sites that promote the independence of Western Sahara that were previously blocked have been unblocked. These include the Web site Sahara Occidental (<http://www.sahara-occidental.com>) and the Web sites for the Union of Sahrawi Journalists and Writers ([www.upes.org](http://www.upes.org)) and the Association of Families of Sahrawi Prisoners and Disappeared ([www.afapredesa.org](http://www.afapredesa.org)).

Previous ONI tests found the same trend; more pro-independence Western Sahara Web sites are becoming accessible. Similarly, the Web site of an Islamist opposition movement, Justice and Spirituality, (<http://www.aljamaa.info>) was found accessible.

Blogging platform LiveJournal ([www.livejournal.com](http://www.livejournal.com)), however, continues to be blocked. Also blocked are the Web-based anonymizers [www.anonymizer.com](http://www.anonymizer.com)

and the circumvention tool

[www.multiproxy.org](http://www.multiproxy.org)

Of all of the Web sites tested containing GLBT-related content, only one was found to be blocked (<http://www.kelma.org>), apparently because the site has a special section for the Maghreb region at <http://www.kelma.org/kelmaghreb.htm>. ONI confirmed through technical tests that access to the Web site of Sheikh Mohamed Ben Abderrahman Al-Maghraoui ([Maghrawi.net](http://Maghrawi.net)) was blocked on September 30, 2008, just a few days after the Moroccan authorities announced plans to shut down his Qur'anic schools and close down a Web site on which the Sheikh decreed that the marriage of nine-year-old girls is allowed by Islam, a decree that was considered in Morocco to legitimize pedophilia.<sup>45</sup>

### Conclusion

Morocco's Internet filtration regime is relatively light and focuses on a few blog sites, a few highly visible anonymizers, and for a brief period, the video sharing Web site YouTube. Sites advocating for the independence of the Western Sahara are no longer inaccessible. The issues Morocco faces in Western Sahara's push for independence, the specter of terrorism, and the protection of the royal family and Islam from defamation have led Morocco to crack down on free speech and the press, but have not led it to significantly censor the Internet. As Internet users can access blocked material on other accessible sites, it is clear that Morocco's filtration regime is not comprehensive. Relative to the region, Moroccan Internet access is relatively free, but the fact that the authorities have started to prosecute online writers indicates limited tolerance to users' online activities.

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