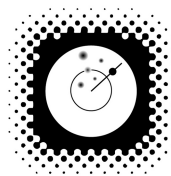**Internet Filtering in**

Qatar

OpenNet Initiative

Overview

The censors in Qatar admit to filtering pornography, political criticism of Gulf countries, and material deemed hostile to Islam. The authorities also pervasively filter gay and lesbian content, sexual health resources, and privacy and circumvention tools. Political filtering is highly selective, but journalists self-censor on sensitive issues such as government policies, Islam, and the ruling family.

Background

Under the leadership of Emir Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, Qatar has become more liberal.[1] However, any organized opposition to the emirate is illegal, and political parties are nonexistent.[2] There are three government branches: the Emir, the partially elected Advisory Council, and the Judiciary.[3]

The new 2003 Constitution protects privacy,[4] "freedom of expression of opinion,"[5] and freedom of the press,[6] but a human rights report by the U.S. State Government said that, despite the new constitution, "the government continued to restrict civil liberties, such as freedoms

of speech (including the Internet), press, assembly, and association. Some limitations on religious freedom existed."[7] The report adds that journalists self-censor when it comes to "government policies, material deemed hostile to Islam, the ruling family, and relations with neighboring states."[8] Also, "[f]oreign newspapers and magazines were reviewed and censored for objectionable sexual, religious, and political content."[9] In addition, the government "restricted the peaceful expression of views via the Internet and censored the Internet for political, religious, and pornographic content through a proxy server, which monitored and blocked Web sites, e-mail, and chat rooms through the state-owned Internet service provider (ISP)."[10] Article 22 of Qatar's constitution also has a clause protecting youth from "corruption, exploitation, evils of physical, mental and spiritual neglect."[11]

Though only one newspaper is owned by the state, the majority of media is owned by either members of the ruling family or those who have close connections to the government.[12] The

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 $)............................	27,664		
Life expectancy at birth (years)...	75		
Literacy rate (% of people age 15+)...	89		
Human development index (out of 177)......................................	35		
Rule of law (percentile)..	80		
Voice and accountability (percentile).......................................	28		
Digital opportunity index (out of 181).......................................	38		
Internet users (% of population)...	50.9		

government subsidizes one of the most famous TV stations in the region, Al-Jazeera. Although the TV station is not hesitant to criticize regional governments, it concentrates more on regional and international news rather than local news.[13]

More than half of the population of the emirate of Qatar is made up of foreign guest workers.[14] The country has a very high literacy rate of 89 percent.[15]

Internet in Qatar

The fact that the government recognized the power of the Internet early on explains why Qatar is the second most connected country in the Arab region,[16] with a penetration rate of 34 percent (2008).[17]

Qatar Telecom (Qtel) is the telecommunications service provider licensed by the Supreme Council of Information and Communication Technology to provide both fixed and mobile telecommunications services.[18] Qtel offers domain name registration, pre-paid Internet cards, instant Internet access (via a telephone line, allowing payment for the Internet through the phone bill), and ADSL lines.[19] However, as of November 2006 Qtel's monopoly on Internet services officially ended.[20] Though the licensing procedure for new ISPs has not yet been published or implemented,[21] the goal was to "issue

licenses to new fixed and mobile providers by the end of 2007."[22]

Broadband penetration in Qatar is rapidly increasing. As of April 2008, it stands at 50 percent.[23] Qtel had some 1.25 million mobile users as of December 2007, which indicates a more than 100 percent penetration rate in Qatar. Qtel also has about 50,000 customers connected to its 3.5G mobile network.[24]

Various plans exist to spread Internet access, such as making free wireless Internet available in various parks in Qatar,[25] making wireless coverage nationwide,[26] and by "Remote Locations services (Wireless Local Loop) that uses Broadband Point-to-Multipoint Radio technology."[27]

In Qatar, "Web censorship focuses on three areas: pornography, political criticism of Gulf leaders and anti-Islamic sites" all in the name of "maintain[ing] ethical standards" and protecting "the culture of the society."[28] However, such sites are said to be blocked only for private and home users, while businesses can access the websites. [29]

Qatar's Global Information Technology Report 2007-2008 concluded that, even though there are many e-education initiatives in Qatar, parental anxiety might prevent children from enrolling in these initiatives.[30] The report claims that in the Qatari society, "the issue of inappropriate

content on the Internet is a huge barrier to wholesale adoption of the technology. Some parents resist children's Internet use and a wide technological divide exists between children and their parents."[31]

A local media report said that 41 percent of youngsters in Qatar spend most of their summer vacation at Internet cafés, mostly browsing pornographic Web sites, as Internet cafés are able to bypass Qtel's filtering regime.[32]

Legal and regulatory framework

Qatar's Supreme Council for Communications and Information Technology, (ictQatar) is the main regulatory authority in Qatar.[33]

In 2006 a new Telecommunications law was promulgated.[34] Much of the Telecommunications law is dedicated to competition and dominant service providers. Article 23 states that for the purpose of interconnection any service provider can be designated as the dominant service provider in one or more telecommunications markets "in accordance with the competition policy." Chapter 9 lays out the competition policy; Article 43 describes abuses of dominance.[35] No details are available for the licensing of ISPs, only that the General Secretariat is in charge of licensing.[36] Chapter 15 states that "power of monitoring and enforcement," with the permission of the Attorney General and the Chairman of the Board, "may require service providers or others to provide information necessary for exercising its powers, and the information shall be furnished in the form, manner, and time as the government specifies."[37]

The last chapter of the law covers offenses and penalties—mostly having to do with penalties that violate the previously mentioned articles, privacy, or security. However, there are two subsets in this chapter which have a broader

scope: clause 6 of Article 66 states that any person who uses "a telecommunication network" or allows "such use for the purposes of disturbing, irritating or offending any persons" can be fined or imprisoned for up to one year. Also, under clause 7 of Article 66, "using any facility or telecommunications service in a manner that violates the rules of this Law or other laws" is punishable in the same manner.[38] The vague wording of both these articles restricts Internet users, as they can be applied in various cases.

According to Qtel, Internet censorship revolves around three main areas: pornography, political criticism of Gulf countries, and sites containing materials deemed offensive to Islam. However, Internet users in Qatar have complained that Qtel has blocked non-obscene or non-offensive Web sites. Qatar's telecom regulator ictQATAR said it does not advise Qtel on blocking Internet sites and that Qtel blocks sites in accordance with the guidelines issued by law enforcment authorities.[39]

In July 2008, ictQATAR allowed QTel and Vodafone Qatar to provide voice services to the public and made it legal for any person or business to use VoIP services for voice calls for their own use. Businesses within the State of Qatar are prohibited from selling VoIP calls or services to the public without a license issued by ictQATAR.[40]

Surveillance

There are no reports of specific Internet surveillance in Qatar, but a report by Reporters Without Borders said that Qtel, "has the means to spy on messages sent through the other ISPs."[41]

A U.S. State Department Human Rights report said that the government of Qatar censors the Internet through a proxy server that monitors and blocks Web sites, e-mail, and chat rooms through the state-

owned ISP.[42]

ONI testing results

ONI conducted in-country tests using Qtel. Qtel was found to censor pornography and sex-related sites pervasively. Web sites that offer critical views of Islam (www.answering-islam.org, www.islameyat.com, www.prophetofdoom.net)were also blocked.

There is also very selective filtering of political content. Examples include www.qatarsucks.com, a Web site that claims to expose the poor living conditions of "hundreds of thousands of vulnerable workers who have been systematically victimized in Qatar." The other example is www.arabtimes.com, the US based news Web site which is often critical of Arab leaders including Qatar's royal family.

Web sites about sexual health issues, HIV, circumcision, and birth control were also extensively blocked, including "Go Ask Alice," a health question and answer Internet resource produced by the Alice! Health Promotion Program at Columbia University (www.goaskalice.columbia.edu). Other Web sites blocked in this category include www.sexualhealth.com, www.positive.org, www.teenhealthfx.com, www.contraception.net, www.circumcision.org, and www.ultimatebirthcontrol.com.

Dating and escort services Web sites were also blocked (www.kelly-escort.ch, www.online-dating.org, www.luxuryjoy.com), as were GLBT Web sites, including many that do not contain explicit content (www.al-fatiha.org, www.glas.org, www.simplygay.com, www.gayromeo.com, www.lesboerotica.net, www.gayhealth.com, www.bglad.com, www.lesbians-against-violence.com).

Circumvention tools, anonymizers, and privacy tools were extensively blocked (psiphon.civisec.org, www.anonymization.net, www.w3privacy.com, www.peacefire.org, www.stupidcensorship.com, www.anonymizer.com). Additionally, a few Web sites that provide information on hacking and cracking were found blocked (www.passwordhq.com, www.allpasswords.com, www.superpasswords.com). There was also sporadic filtering of miscellaneous sites such as www.boingboing.net and www.collegehumor.com.

Conclusion

Qatar is the second most connected country in the Arab region, but Internet users have heavily censored access to the Internet. The censors publicly acknowledge blocking pornography, political criticism of Gulf countries, and sites deemed offensive to Islam, but Internet users complain that non-obscene or non-offensive Web sites are also blocked. In addition to porn, gay and lesbian content, and dating and escorting services, results show extensive filtering of content on sex health issues - including that produced by academic institutions - and online privacy and circumvention tools. Political filtering is limited, but journalists practice self-censorship and avoid reporting on sensitive issues. Interestingly, the filtering in Qatar, which is relatively transparent (a block page is served), is advised by the law-enforcement authorities rather than the telecom regulator.

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