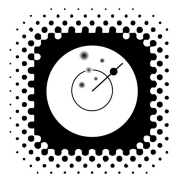


# Internet Filtering in the United Arab Emirates



## OpenNet Initiative

### Overview

The government of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) censors political and religious content and pervasively filters Web sites that contain pornography or content relating to alcohol and drug use, gay and lesbian issues, or online dating or gambling. Online privacy and circumvention tools, as well as some sites belonging to Nazis or historical revisionists, are blocked. Additionally, legal controls limit free expression and behavior, restricting political discourse and dissent online.

### Background

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is a federation of seven emirates formed in 1971 after independence from Britain. Each emirate maintains a large degree of independence, and the UAE is governed by a Supreme Council of Rulers consisting of the seven emirs of the emirates. Though the UAE is one of the most liberal countries in the Gulf, it was until December 2006 the only state in the region not to have elected bodies.<sup>1</sup>

The UAE's economy continues to grow, but civil society is stagnate and human rights progress has been slow.

Authorities have exerted censorial pressure on a wide range of activists, impeding the kind of vigorous monitoring and reporting that can draw attention to and help curb human rights abuses.<sup>2</sup> Although the Prime Minister decreed in 2007 that journalists should not face prison for "for reasons related to their work," current media law allows imprisonment of journalists and suspension of publication for publishing "materials that cause confusion among the public." The government monitors press content, and journalists routinely exercise self-censorship.<sup>3</sup>

Though the emirate of Dubai has established itself as a regional and international hub for media by creating a media zone authority that allows 100% foreign ownership and offers tax breaks. ONI test results show that the Internet is filtered in this hub, and there are reports of other forms of censorship.<sup>4</sup> For example, Dubai authorities interrupted the broadcast of two Pakistani TV stations, Geo News and Ary One World, in November 2007. Geo News said the decision resulted from constant pressure by then Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf, who had at the time implemented a "state of emergency."<sup>5</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 \$).....	25,514		
Life expectancy at birth (years).....	78.3		
Literacy rate (% of people age 15+).....	88.7		
Human development index (out of 177).....	39		
Rule of law (percentile).....	70		
Voice and accountability (percentile).....	23		
Digital opportunity index (out of 181).....	37		
Internet users (% of population).....	64		

Dubai allowed the two stations to resume broadcasting later following negotiations with the Pakistani government and Dubai Media City.<sup>6</sup>

### Internet in the United Arab Emirates

The UAE continues to lead the Arab world in adoption of information and communication technology, according to a World Economic Forum report,<sup>7</sup> and is expected to spend about \$3.3 billion on information technology and communications hardware for schools, hospitals and other civil projects between 2008 and 2011.<sup>8</sup>

According to the Internet Telecommunication Union, Internet penetration in the UAE has increased from 36 percent in 2006 to an estimated 64 percent in 2008.<sup>9</sup> The Arab Advisors Group states account penetration to be at approximately 25 percent. ADSL/broadband accounts penetration of total population reached around 11 percent by end of 2008. By end of October 2008, Etisalat's ADSL accounts constituted around 36 percent of the operator's total fixed lines.<sup>10</sup>

Etisalat remains the dominant telecom provider, but in the interest of competition, the UAE's Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (TRA) facilitated the launch of the Emirates Integrated Telecommunications Company, named Du. Established in 2007, Du is an integrated telecommunications provider formed by a paid-up capital of USD 1.1

billion which offers voice, data and entertainment on mobile networks and converged broadband, TV, and landline services.<sup>11</sup>

Competition in the broadband Internet market is limited because the two ISPs still do not share each other's networks, and Du is still unable to offer broadband Internet or landline telephone services outside of a handful of property developments in Dubai where it owns the physical telephone network.<sup>12</sup> Because Etisalat has been the sole telecom company for 30 years, it owns the national telephone network, based on both copper wire and new fiber-optic cables.<sup>13</sup>

In an effort to increase the number of visitors to Arabic Web sites and promote and strengthen the UAE's identity, in March 2009 the UAE's Ministerial Council for Services approved a proposal by the TRA to put the UAE country code top-level domain in Arabic (Emarat). The proposal is part of the TRA's efforts to create a national plan for operating the Internet in Arabic.<sup>14</sup>

### Legal and regulatory frameworks

A new draft media law is expected to be issued in 2009. The highest media organization in the UAE, the National Media Council (NMC), says the draft law provides unprecedented provisions that protect and promote freedom of expression in the country. It also says the draft law "provides journalists freedom from coercion to reveal

sources, reflecting the government's commitment to the journalistic right to protect sources; in this particular regard, the pending law's protection exceeds that of many advanced democracies, including the United States."<sup>15</sup>

The pending law, passed by the Federal National Council in January 2009, was rejected by the UAE Journalists Association because, according to the association's chairman, "It has nothing to do with the concept of media; it contains 45 articles which don't provide a proper description of the media's duties and rights. Similarly, there are 10 articles which talk about penalties and punishments."<sup>16</sup>

International advocacy groups have also expressed concerns over the draft law. Human Rights Watch (HRW) says the pending draft law unlawfully restricts free expression and will unduly interfere with the media's ability to report on sensitive subjects, and that it includes provisions that would grant the government virtually complete control in deciding who is allowed to work as a journalist, as well as which media organizations are allowed to operate in the country. HRW also says that the new law contains some improvement over the draconian media law currently in effect, but will continue to punish journalists for such infractions as "disparaging" government officials or publishing "misleading" news that "harms the country's economy."<sup>17</sup>

The Committee to Protect Journalists has also expressed concern over the draft law in a letter they sent to the President of the UAE urging him to reject the law in its current form because, if passed, "it will negatively impact the state of press freedom in the UAE."<sup>18</sup>

The telecommunication services in the UAE are regulated by the TRA, which was established in 2003 by a Federal Law and is tasked with ensuring adequacy of telecommunications services throughout the country and establishing and implementing a

regulatory and policy framework.<sup>19</sup> The TRA is responsible for producing the Internet Access Management (IAM) policy, which outlines prohibited online content categories for ISPs. These categories include: Internet tools for bypassing blocked content; content for learning criminal skills and illegal drugs; content containing pornography and nudity; gambling sites; sites for hacking and malicious codes; content offensive to religions, phishing Internet sites; Internet content that downloads spyware; Web sites providing unlicensed voice over Internet protocol (VoIP) service; terrorism content; and prohibited top level domain,<sup>20</sup> apparently a reference to the top level domain of Israel (.il), which is blocked in the UAE.

The UAE government has issued a federal law on combating cybercrimes. Cyber-Crime Law No. 2 of 2006 considers any intentional act that abolishes, destroys, or reveals secrets, or that results in the republishing of personal or official information to be a crime. Individuals may be imprisoned for using the Internet to defame Islamic places of worship and traditions, insult any recognized religion, or promote "sinful acts." Anyone convicted of "transcending family principles and values" or setting up a Web site for groups "calling for, facilitating, and promoting ideas in breach of the general order and public decency" may be jailed.<sup>21</sup>

In August 2007, a court in the Emirate of Ras al-Khaimah sentenced the creator of Web site majan.net to one year in prison and a fine for defaming a local official. The court also ordered the site to be shut down. In September, the same individual received a five-month prison sentence and a fine in a second defamation case involving another local official but was released on bail at the end of September 2007. Two months later, his two prison sentences were overturned by an appeals court after defamation complaints were withdrawn

by the officials. In the end, he received a one-year suspended prison sentence after being convicted in a third defamation case.<sup>22</sup>

In April 2009, the chief of Dubai's police force denied allegations that the Dubai Police had asked UAE's Telecommunication Regulatory Authority to censor Web sites which contain any of 500 objectionable keywords. Earlier reports said the head of the Doha Media Freedom Center claimed that the Dubai Police had developed a list of 500 keywords, by which access to certain Web sites would be blocked.<sup>23</sup> The police chief stated that the government does not attempt to censor Web sites critical to the UAE and that the 500 search terms designed to shield UAE Internet users against pornographic content were proposed by the telecommunication regulators themselves, not the Dubai Police.<sup>24</sup>

This denial came shortly after Dubai's police chief called for the blocking of video-sharing site YouTube because, he said, the site contains religiously inappropriate content. He also said that the site contains indecent material that influences the young people towards delinquency. He added that disseminating pornography and offensive content is not freedom and that content offered to users in the Arab and Muslim countries should be different from that offered to users in the West because they have different cultures. Hence, content should be filtered centrally because it is very difficult for families to monitor Internet use at home.<sup>25</sup>

YouTube and Google have denied that they are engaged in plans to censor online content in the UAE.<sup>26</sup>

Although Etisalat and Du conform to the TRA policies by automatically blocking Web sites which offer free Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) services, individuals - including Internet café owners - have found ways of getting around the ban by using the Internet to

make cheap international calls. Violators have been prosecuted. For example, a police officer in the emirate of Ras Al Khaimah warned several Internet café owners against the use of "illegal calling cards" for making inexpensive international phone calls. Several violating cafés were referred to the public prosecution for investigation.<sup>27</sup>

### **Surveillance**

The authorities have established committees and electronic surveillance departments to monitor objectionable Internet activities. For example, a government committee was established in March 2009 to monitor Internet cafés in order to ensure that Internet connections in these cafés do not bypass filtering regimes set up by the two national ISPs as per the regulations of the TRA. This move was in response to speculations that some Internet cafés provide unfiltered Internet connections using Virtual Private Networks.<sup>28</sup>

Also, an online surveillance team was set up by Dubai police to carry out around-the-clock checks on the Internet. The team, known as e-police, investigated a total of 222 cases in 2008. The cases include 87 involving fraud and other financial crimes, 38 cases of illegal hacking and 92 cases of defamation and extortion. The electronic patrol team has set up special forums and used assumed names in an attempt to collect information about potential criminal activity.<sup>29</sup> This online surveillance department announced in April 2009 that it managed to track down and later arrest women who promote their sex services and publicize their Dubai phone numbers online. In addition, the surveillance team announced that it managed to track down individuals who offer inexpensive illegal VoIP services from their apartments.<sup>30</sup>

### ONI testing results

ONI testing in 2008-2009 revealed that UAE censors have increased the scope and depth of Internet filtering since 2006-2007.

One of the significant policy shifts that happened during ONI testing is the implementation of TRA-mandated filtering by the ISP Du, which used to offer unfettered access to the Internet in the Dubai free zones including Dubai Media City, Dubai Internet City, and the residential areas affiliated with the free zones. Du began filtering on April 14, 2008; ONI test results show that its filtering is almost as extensive as that of the other national ISP Etisalat, which has the lion's share of the Internet user market.

The two ISPs were found to block Web sites that express alternative political or religious views. For example, in addition to blocking UAEprison.com, a site hosting testimonials of former prisoners and critiques of the government's human rights practices, and the site of the U.S.-based Arab Times (arabtimes.com), ONI found that the censors blocked the Web site called "Save Zack Shahin" (www.savezackshahin.com), an online campaign calling for the release of U.S. citizen Zack Shahin from a UAE prison. The site encourages Americans to send letters to members of Congress to help Shahin. Shahin is a former chief executive of a Dubai property developer and was charged, together with a former UAE minister, in April 2009 with seizing public money and harming state interest.<sup>31</sup>

Another example is the blocking of the site UAE Torture (uaetorture.com), which posted video clips of a UAE royal family member allegedly torturing an Afghan businessman. The story drew the attention of international media such as ABC,<sup>32</sup> as well as human rights advocates such as Human Rights Watch.<sup>33</sup> Blocking of this site has been inconsistent however, and it has been

found to be accessible and inaccessible at different times.

The UAE censors are also apparently sensitive to content that is critical of the state of the local economy or the society. For example, the censors blocked access to the Arabic UAE blog Mujarad Ensan (Arabic for "Just a man") a few days after the anonymous blogger published a post sarcastically titled "Laugh with me and say: Our economy is in a good condition." In the text of the blog post, he accused the UAE government of lacking transparency when dealing with the current US economic crisis, and the local papers of lying about the real status of the local economy. The writer also accused government-owned real estate companies of publishing exaggerated information about business deals to create the impression that the local economy has not been negatively effective by the US financial crisis.<sup>34</sup> The blog became accessible a few days later for unknown reasons.

Another example is the blocking of the blog Secret Dubai Diary (secretdubai.blogspot.com), which was also found blocked in earlier testing. This blog is apparently blocked because it offers critical review of social life in UAE.

Similar to earlier testing results, several sites presenting unorthodox perspectives on Islam (thekoran.com, islamreview.com, secularislam.org) were blocked, along with a handful of sites promoting minority faiths (albrhan.org, ansarweb.net). Among the few sites considered "extremist" that are filtered in the UAE: hinduunity.org, a site advocating Hindu solidarity and resistance to Islam, and kahanezadakh.com, a site devoted to the founder of the militant Jewish Defense League.

ONI testing shows that the censors have expanded the filtering in these categories to include previously accessible Web sites such as the presumably UAE-based atheist blogs Ben

Kerishan, (benkerishan.blogspot.com), The Land of Sand (thelandofsands.com), and Ben Short (benshort.blogspot.com). Also currently blocked are Wikipedia pages which contain information about religiously sensitive content such as the film *Fitna*, produced by Dutch politician Geert Wilders and considered offensive to Islam, and the Wikipedia page about the Islamic prophet Muhammad, possibly because the page displays drawings of the Prophet, considered offensive to most Muslims.

In March 2009, the censors blocked access to the Web site Ahmed and Salim (ahmedandsalim.com), an Israeli Web site which posted video episodes considered offensive to Arabs and Muslims. The UAE has also blocked access to the YouTube pages where the video clips appear.

The UAE's TRA ordered the blocking of the Web site and the YouTube links only a few days after the content appeared online, apparently because, in addition to the content perceived offensive to Islam, one of the characters is dressed in traditional Gulf attire, and the UAE flag appears in several scenes.<sup>35</sup>

Interestingly, several Web sites that present information on Nazism, Holocaust deniers, and historical revisionists were found to be blocked during testing. These include the Web site hitler.org and that of the Institute for Historical Review's publishing arm (<http://www.noontidepress.com>). Also blocked was the Web site vdare.com, which is often described as anti-Semitic. Meanwhile, the state continues to block access to all sites on the Israeli country code top-level domain ".il."

ONI testing reveals that the UAE filters still target social networking sites, video and photo sharing sites, bookmarking services, and blogging services. However, filtering of these sites has not been consistent. For example, Livejournal.com, a free service for journaling and blogging, was blocked in

the UAE in June 2008, apparently because it was categorized as a dating site in the database of Secure Computing, a commercial filtering product. The UAE uses SmartFilter, a product of Secure Computing, to block access to various content categories including dating, porn, sex, and gambling.<sup>36</sup> Secure Computing was acquired by McAfee in 2008.<sup>37</sup> Access to the site was restored a few weeks later.

Similar to earlier testing results, recent ONI testing revealed pervasive filtering of pornographic and gay and lesbian sites. Results also reveal blocking of previously accessible Arabic forums, which are commonly used to facilitate the exchange of Arabic explicit content.

Compared to earlier testing, fewer Web pages relating to sexual health education were found to be blocked. For example, previously filtered sites such as [circumcision.org](http://circumcision.org) and [sexualhealth.com](http://sexualhealth.com) were found accessible, though other sites in the same categories are still blocked. Some Web sites containing provocative attire ([lingerie.com](http://lingerie.com)) were still filtered. Sites promoting alcohol and drug use or facilitating online gambling or dating were also blocked in large numbers, and many Arabic-language dating sites or sites that target singles living the Middle East ([www.arablounge.com](http://www.arablounge.com), [www.gaymiddleeast.com/country/uaemirates.htm](http://www.gaymiddleeast.com/country/uaemirates.htm)) have been added to the blacklist. Nudity, even if in an artistic context and non-erotic, is censored (an example is the Arabic magazine <http://www.jasadmag.com>).

Internet tools, including those that facilitate hacking ([thesecretlist.com](http://thesecretlist.com)), anonymizer ([anonymizer.com](http://anonymizer.com)) sites, translation (Google Web site translator, not the text translator) remain blocked. Similarly, numerous VoIP sites ([Skype.com](http://Skype.com), [pc2call.com](http://pc2call.com)) were still blocked in accordance with the national ban on such applications.

In October 2006, the UAE unblocked access to several social networking and multimedia sharing sites, including youtube.com, flickr.com, metacafé.com, and myspace.com. However, sections of these sites containing objectionable material remain unavailable. The photo-sharing site flickr.com was later blocked entirely.

### Conclusion

The UAE continues to prevent its citizens from accessing a significant amount of Internet content spanning a variety of topics. Though the vast majority of sites filtered are those deemed obscene in some way, a select few political sites are blocked, as are some pertaining to Nazis, Holocaust denial and historical revision. The entire “.il” top-level domain continues to be blocked as well, which is more indicative of the UAE’s opposition to the state of Israel than to content contained therein.

Additionally, the state has extended its filtering scheme to the Dubai free zones, which previously enjoyed unfettered Internet access, and has increased the depth of technical filtering, blocking more sites across broader categories.

The UAE now employs SmartFilter software to block content related to nudity, sex, dating, gambling, cults/occult, religious conversion, and drugs. Sites pertaining to anonymizer tools, hacking, translation tools (as these have been used as proxies), and VoIP applications are also filtered in this manner.

Lastly, there are government efforts to monitor Internet activities in public Internet cafés to ensure connections provided there do not bypass national filtering. Electronic surveillance to monitor objectionable online activities is publically acknowledged by the authorities.

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