Internet Filtering in

Yemen

OpenNet Initiative
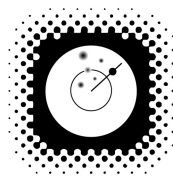
Overview

Internet filtering in the Republic of Yemen has begun to target political and news Web sites and continues to target a broad scope of pornography, GLBT content, and content that presents a critical view of Islam. Despite the wide range of content censored, however, the depth of filtering in Yemen is inconsistent; many users of Yemen's primary Internet service providers (ISPs) do not experience filtering when the user licensing quota in the filtering software agreement is exceeded.

Background

The modern Republic of Yemen was established in 1990 when traditionalist North Yemen and Marxist South Yemen merged. Although the country has been modernizing and opening up to the world, it still maintains much of its tribal character and many of its traditions.[1] Yemeni political parties are prohibited to contradict Islam, endorse any former regime, or use mosques or educational and governmental facilities to promote or criticize any party or political organization.

There are three government branches: the executive branch, the legislative branch, and the judiciary branch.[2]

Although Yemen's constitution guarantees freedom of speech and of the press, journalists have been threatened, harassed, beaten, and detained; newspapers have been shut down; the issuing of certain newspapers has been prevented; and text message news services have been suspended.[3] The year 2007 witnessed an increase in arbitrary arrests and detentions, as well as in restrictions on freedoms of speech, press, and peaceful assembly. In addition, citizens' ability to change their government has been limited due to corruption, fraudulent voter registration, and administrative weakness.[4] Still, despite the country's conservative political practices, Yemen's press is considered among the freest in the Arab region.[5]

Internet in Yemen

Yemen was rated by the Arab Advisors Group's 2008 annual report as one of the lowest adopters of telecommunication

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			●	

services in the Arab world.[6] The country lacks a robust telecommunications and information and communications technology (ICT) sector. For example, by the end of 2007, fixed line broadband penetration in Yemen was as low as .05 percent.[7]

The International Telecommunications Union (ITU) estimates that only 1.4 percent of Yemen's population uses the Internet and that the PC penetration rate is less than 3 percent.[8] Many cannot afford—and are simply unfamiliar with—the equipment and services needed to access the Internet.[9]

Yemen is serviced by two ISPs: YemenNet, which is a service of the government's Public Telecommunication Corporation (PTC),[10] and TeleYemen's Y.Net, which is part of the government's PTC but is managed by FranceTelecom.[11]

Businesses own 60 percent of Internet subscriber accounts, while government and educational institutions own only 3 percent of subscriber accounts.[12] Far fewer women than men access the Internet, which may be because the primary Internet access locations are Internet cafés (61 percent) and work (24 percent), with home Internet availability considerably lower (13 percent). Only 2 percent access the Internet from schools.[13] By September 2007, the number of Internet cafés in Yemen reached 886; they are frequented by users mainly for chatting, playing games, and visiting entertainment websites.[14]

Legal and regulatory framework

The Ministry of Telecommunication and Information Technology (MTIT) grants ISP licenses;[15] PTC, a branch under the MTIT, is responsible for the management and growth of telecommunications in Yemen.[16]

ISPs impose restrictions on the use of Internet services, preventing subscribers from accessing or transmitting certain content. The terms and conditions set by TeleYemen (a.k.a. Y.Net) state: "Access to applications which transmit or receive live video or audio, or make similar demands on the capacity of the network, constitutes an unreasonable usage which may affect the performance of the network, and is not permitted."[17] Also covered are customer responsibilities, including prohibitions on "sending any message which is offensive on moral, religious, communal, or political grounds" (6.1.1).[18] Additionally, TeleYemen reserves the right to control access "and data stored in the Y.Net system in any manner deemed appropriate by TeleYemen" (7.1).[19] Finally, section 6.3.3 cautions subscribers that TeleYemen will report "Any use or attempted use of the Y.Net service which contravenes any applicable Law of the Republic of Yemen."[20]

Yemen's Press and Publications Law, passed in 1990, subjects publications and

broadcast media to broad prohibitions and harsh penalties.[21] This law theoretically establishes a press that "shall be independent and shall have full freedom to practice its vocation," but it must operate "within the context of Islamic creed, within the basic principles of the Constitution, goals of the Yemeni Revolution, and the aim of solidifying national unity."[22]

The Press and Publications Law further states that local journalists must be Yemeni citizens and must obtain Press Cards from the Ministry of Information. Foreign journalists must be accredited to receive Press Cards, and such cards can be revoked by the Ministry of Information at the Ministry's discretion. This revocation requires the former journalist to leave Yemen unless they have an independent reason for residency.[23]

A new draft of the law, proposed in 2005, was denounced by the Yemen Journalists Syndicate (YJS) as being more repressive than the existing 1990 law.[24] The draft law "ignored the question of electronic media freedom, putting an end to the state ownership and monopoly over broadcast media. Rather, it went on controlling the websites just like print media."[25] The YJS and civil society organizations have failed to reach a compromise with the Ministry of Information and the government over several controversial articles of the new law.[26]

This law has been used to prosecute journalists and to shutdown publications. For example, in April 2008, the Ministry of Information threatened to revoke the license of the independent newspaper *Al-Wasat Weekly* because it published an article which the ministry considered a violation of the press and publication law.[27] However, a court overruled this decision and fined the Ministry of Information for violating the law.[28]

Yemeni journalists face major restrictions and prosecution, arrests, and physical attacks in the street. The authorities have blocked access to several Internet Web sites and banned mobile phone news services.[29] In April 2008, the Ministry of Information declared that the penal code will be used to prosecute writers who publish on the Internet content that "incites hatred" or "harms national interests."[30]

Surveillance

In addition to technical and legal restrictions, the Yemeni authorities impose physical restrictions on cyber cafés, the primary access location for many Yemenis, to enable café operators to monitor the Internet activities of the customers. The Ministry of Information has ordered the owners of internet cafés in Yemen to remove partitions placed between Internet workstations in cyber cafés, and to make computer screens visible to the café operator. Internet users in some cases are also required to submit to the café operator personal information before they can use the Internet.[31] A police station in October 2007 ordered Internet cafés to close at midnight and demanded that users show their identification cards to the café operator. A local rights group described the action as "a clear restriction of liberties and rights of citizens and business."[32]

Some Internet café owners use computer monitoring software to monitor the online activities of their customers. A café operator said, "Through a program I can closely find what my customers are browsing. When I find that a customer is navigating pornography website, I shut the customer's system automatically from my disk and I ask him to leave immediately."[33]

ONI testing results

ONI ran in-country tests on Yemen's two

ISPs, YemenNet and TeleYemen/Y.Net, and found a significant increase in political filtering. Several political and Web sites run by opposition or independence groups were found blocked. Examples include the Web site of the Yemeni Socialist Party (www.aleshteraki.net) and the Web sites of the political groups al-Shora and al-Ommah (www.al-shora.net, www.newomma.net). Also blocked were opposition and independent news Web sites such as the news aggregator Yemen Portal (www.yemenportal.net), Shabwah Press (www.shabwahpress.net) and al-Hadath (www.alhadath-yemen.com). Some forums which contain political and social discussion were also blocked (www.al-yemen.org).

In March 2008, ONI verified reports that the Web site of Maktoob Blog (maktoobblog.com) was inaccessible in Yemen. By blocking the entire domain of Maktoob Blog, Internet users in Yemen were prevented from access one of the biggest blogging communities in the Middle East and North Africa. The blocking of Maktoob Blog lasted about a week.

Interestingly, political filtering in Yemen is not transparent; users who attempt to access banned political content receive error messages instead of the standard block page served when users attempt to access banned sex content.

The two ISPs were found to be using the filtering software from U.S.-based Websense to extensively block Web sites containing pornography. They have also added previously accessible forums which facilitate the exchange of Arabic-language explicit content to their block lists. Also blocked were Web sites that contain provocative attire, sex education materials, and anonymizing and privacy tools.

Search strings containing words such as "sex" and "porn" and other suggestive terms are blocked, as are some sites hosting gay and lesbian content, hacking information, dating and escort services, and non-erotic nudity. The ISPs also filter some religious conversion sites and a limited number of Voice-over Internet Protocol (VoIP) sites.

ONI monitored Web access in Yemen during Yemen's September 2006 presidential election and found that the government-owned YemenNet blocked access to several independent news and political opposition sites, including Nass Press (nasspress.com), Al-Mostakela Forum (www.mostakela.com), and the Yemeni Council (www.al-yemen.org).

The ISP YemenNet continues to have an issue with its filtering system; ONI investigation found that the ISP uses a Blue Coat integrated cache/filter appliance to run Websense but possesses a limited number of concurrent user licenses—not nearly enough to cover all of the Internet users in the country. Thus, when the number of subscribers accessing the Internet at a given time exceeds the limited number of user licenses, the requests of all users circumvent the filtering software.

Conclusion

Testing revealed evidence that the state is currently preventing citizens from accessing news and political content online, as well as filtering pornography, GLBT content and Web sites containing content deemed offensive to Islam. The authorities impose physical restrictions on cyber cafés so as to enable operators to monitor the Internet activities of the customers.

The failures of the filtering system installed on Yemen's principal ISP hint at the state's limited capacity to control content, rather than any willingness to allow information to flow freely. In essence, the breadth of content filtered should temper any optimism about the evident ineffectiveness of filtering in Yemen witnessed in this round of testing.

NOTES

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