

Algeria

Although Internet access in Algeria is not restricted by filtering, the state controls the Internet infrastructure and regulates content by other means.¹ Internet users and Internet service providers (ISPs) can face criminal penalties for posting or allowing the posting of material deemed contrary to public order or morality, for example, and journalists report being subjected to government surveillance.²



Background

Despite democratic advances made since Algeria held its first contested elections in 2004,³ the government continues to invite criticism from human rights organizations for repressing dissent. In February 2006, Algeria's cabinet passed the so-called emergency law, which restricts freedom of assembly and threatens imprisonment for those who speak out on atrocities that occurred during the country's civil war.⁴ Algerian officials frequently harass journalists and human rights advocates under the guise of security through defamation laws or dubious criminal prosecutions.⁵ Religious freedom has declined in recent years as President Bouteflika has pushed

through legislation greatly restricting non-Muslim worship.⁶ The government has telecommunications regulations in place that require Internet providers to undertake surveillance of Internet content, but watchdog organizations report that there have been no cases of censorship under the regulations thus far.⁷

Internet in Algeria

Algeria first gained Internet connectivity in 1994 under the auspices of the Center for Research on Scientific and Technical Information (CERIST),⁸ which by law remained the country's sole ISP until 1998.⁹ On August 5, 1998, decree no. 98-257 opened Internet service provision to other

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

Source (by indicator): World Bank 2005, 2006a, 2006a; UNDP 2006; World Bank 2006c, 2006c; ITU 2006, 2005

providers, but private entry into the market proceeded slowly.¹⁰ Two years later, law no. 2000-03 created the Ministry of Post and Telecommunications (MoPT), which included the Internet regulatory agency Algérie Télécom.¹¹ Algérie Télécom launched the ISP Djaweb in 2001¹² to extend service beyond universities and research centers.¹³ Today, Algérie Télécom lists twenty-six ISP partners operating in the country, including CERIST.¹⁴ CERIST continues to develop the academic, noncommercial Internet¹⁵ under the influence of the state¹⁶ and has created nodes in Algiers, Oran, Constantine, and Ourgla.¹⁷

The MoPT—the government agency responsible for the Internet in Algeria—has expressed its desire to promote the Internet as a source of investment and job creation.¹⁸ Though Internet penetration has increased dramatically over the past few years, jumping from approximately 1,500 in 1999¹⁹ to nearly 850,000 in 2006,²⁰ this still represents only 2.6 percent of the population. The government has supported programs that allow users to access the Internet on a “pay-as-you-go” basis, without requiring a monthly subscription.²¹ Although most ISPs offer broadband, ADSL, or satellite plans, the prices of these services remain prohibitively high for many

Algerians.²² Consequently, most Algerian Internet users rely on dialup connections and cybercafés for access.

Legal and regulatory frameworks

The establishment of the MoPT in 2000 signaled the government’s desire to catch up to some of its neighbors and develop the economic potential of the Internet.²³ At the same time, the government has moved to modernize information-control infrastructure and legislation, including extending criminal penalties for publishing material “contrary to public order” to Internet publications.²⁴ All connections between the Algerian network and the Internet at large pass through government-controlled content caching servers, an arrangement that reduces bandwidth costs but could also facilitate filtering.²⁵

In January 2004 Algeria Telecom announced a deal with Daewoo to introduce high-speed connections. MoPT acts as an independent regulator and is not legally obligated to consult with or inform any other organizations before making decisions.²⁶ Algeria’s network topology is highly centralized,²⁷ and all Internet connections pass through state-controlled content caching servers before reaching the global Internet.²⁸ ISPs are

privately owned, but must obtain a license from the MoPT.²⁹ Approximately fifty companies have obtained licenses.³⁰

Article 144(b) of the criminal code criminalizes “insulting or defaming” the president, parliament, armed forces, or any other public body, in writing, drawings or speech, through radio, television, electronic, or computer means.³¹ Article 14 of a 1998 telecommunications decree makes ISPs responsible for the sites they host, and requires them to take “all necessary steps to ensure constant surveillance” of content to prevent access to “material contrary to public order and morality.”³² Journalists report that it can take up to two days to receive their e-mails, and consequently suspect the government is spying on them.³³ The regulatory framework is under review and MoPT had targeted 2005 as the year for liberalization of various sectors of the telecommunications market.³⁴

ONI testing results

Among the most sensitive topics in Algeria are criticism of President Bouteflika and the military,³⁵ same-sex relationships,³⁶ and non-Islamic religious worship.³⁷ Algerians who engage in any of these activities face serious sanctions, including stiff fines and imprisonment. Nonetheless, ONI testing found no evidence that the government filters Internet sites or activity associated with these, or any other, sensitive topics. The government’s primary forms of control thus appear to be the access controls and content monitoring regulations noted above.

Conclusion

Although Algeria does not at present filter Internet content, legislation that criminalizes peaceful criticism of the government and requires ISPs to police online content, together with a highly centralized network, could facilitate the filtering of online content in the future.

NOTES

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