

Egypt

Currently there is no evidence of Internet filtering in Egypt, although a small group of politically sensitive Web sites have been blocked in the past. Online writers and bloggers have been harassed and detained for their activities online and offline. Current laws allow jail terms for journalists, editors, and online writers.



Background

Freedom of the press and freedom of expression have traditionally faced severe limits in Egypt, particularly in the spheres of religion and politics. July 2006 amendments to Egypt's Press Law left intact provisions that criminalize criticizing the president or the leaders of foreign countries and "spreading false news." Although local bloggers and human rights organizations now routinely use the Internet to cross the "red lines" that formerly circumscribed public speech, the Egyptian government monitors online communications and, in some cases, has harassed and detained people for their online activities. Though no laws specifically empower the Egyptian government to filter Web sites, provisions of the Penal Code and the Emergency Law (effective since 1981)¹

provide the government with broad authority to restrict and monitor communications. Although many journalists do criticize the government without repercussion, the government detained and beat several journalists in 2006.

Internet in Egypt

Since introducing Internet service in 1993, the Egyptian government has embarked on an ambitious program to expand Web access. The country has about five million Internet users, making up approximately 6.75 percent of the total population.² The government's "Free Internet Program," which allows any Egyptian with a computer, a modem, and a phone line to

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

access the Internet for the price of a local phone call, has led to a sharp rise in Internet use and has served as a model for other developing countries.³ As only 3.78 percent of people own personal computers,⁴ most users gain access through one of Egypt's four hundred⁵ Internet cafés, a Mobile Internet Unit,⁶ or nearly 1,300 public information technology clubs.⁷ These clubs allow users to access the Internet for a small fee; they are affiliated with the Ministry of Communication and are located in public buildings such as schools.⁸ In 2004 the "PC for Every Home" initiative helped 120,000 people obtain a personal computer through a combination of low-cost hardware and government financing.⁹ The government is experimenting with WiMax technology that could provide vast areas of the countryside with high-speed, wireless access.¹⁰ Despite all of these efforts, Internet access remains most prevalent in the cities.¹¹

Egypt boasts the largest fixed-line communications network in the Arab world. Where many nations in the region are serviced by state-owned companies or monopolies, Egypt has licensed four Internet carriers and eight data service providers, along with hundreds of Internet service providers (ISPs).¹² Service is currently provided

by 211 ISPs, the largest of which are LINKdotNET, a private company founded in 1992, and TEDData, the Internet arm of the giant Telecom Egypt, slated for privatization in 2007 whose shares are 80 percent owned by the Egyptian government and 20 percent free float. In 2004, the government, along with nine companies, introduced ADSL service to Egypt. As of 2006, the service had approximately 130,000 subscribers at an average monthly cost of 95 Egyptian pounds (USD17).¹³ In 2007, the National Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (NTRA) is expected to issue two new licenses for international telecommunications services, and the country has recently liberalized the Voice-over Internet Protocol (VoIP) market.¹⁴

Legal and regulatory frameworks

Despite Egypt's progressive attitude toward industry regulation, the Egyptian government continues to rely on legal and extralegal measures to restrict the flow of information. Egypt's Emergency Law allows authorities to detain individuals without charge or trial for prolonged periods of time and to censor, confiscate, and close down any publication that the Ministry of Interior sees fit.¹⁵ This law has been renewed for

successive three-year periods since President Anwar Sadat's assassination in 1981. Although in his re-election campaign Hosni Mubarak said he would replace the Emergency Law with an anti-terrorism law, in May of 2006 parliament extended the Emergency Law for another two years while the government drafts the new law.¹⁶

Much-anticipated amendments to Egypt's Press Law, which Mubarak signed in July 2006, struck many of the old law's most controversial provisions. However, it left intact prison sentences for journalists who criticize the president or foreign leaders, or who "spread false news,"¹⁷ as mentioned previously. The laws cover print and "other" publications, which courts have interpreted as including online writings.¹⁸

Although there is no law that explicitly empowers the government to block Web sites, a 2006 court decision maintained that the Ministry of Communications & Information Technology is permitted to "block, suspend or shut down any website liable to pose a threat to national security."¹⁹ This ruling gives the Department for Confronting Computer and Internet Crime, a special unit within the Ministry of Interior, additional tools to pursue Web sites deemed "threatening," and some worry that such pursuit is escalating.²⁰

In January 2007, the Ministry of Interior announced plans to propose an international initiative to combat terrorism online. No Web sites are currently blocked outright, but security officials monitor data traffic, including e-mail, blogs, bulletin boards, and other Web sites. Internet café owners have reported that security officials have instructed them to keep lists of their customers and the customers' identification numbers.²¹ Furthermore, Internet café owners must seek a license from the Ministry of Telecommunications;²² those without licenses can be shut down.²³ Owners are sometimes given lists of people who are to be banned from using their cafés, and they are always supposed to check IDs; some places have signs that

"announce 'No entry to political or sexual sites by order of the State Security.'"²⁴

The government has arrested writers for their online activities. In 2003, for example, State Security officers detained activist Ashraf Ibrahim on charges of "spreading false news" for e-mailing accounts and photographs of police violence at anti-war demonstrations to international human rights organizations. On February 22, 2007, a criminal court in Alexandria sentenced 22-year-old blogger Abd al-Karim Nabil Sulaiman to four years in prison on charges of "vilifying Islam" and "insulting the president."²⁵ The Egyptian government has also used the Internet to entrap men engaged in consensual homosexual conduct. Though it is not officially against the law to engage in homosexual acts, dozens of men have been charged with "debauchery" or "distributing obscene material" after chatting with police who were posing as gay men online.²⁶

ONI testing results

ONI conducted in-country tests in fall 2006 and found no evidence of Internet filtering in Egypt. In 2005, most ISPs blocked www.ikhwanonline.com, the official site of the Muslim Brotherhood, Egypt's largest opposition movement. At one time, the popular ISP LINKdotNET blocked www.alshaab.com, the Web site of the Labor Party's biweekly newsletter, but no longer does.²⁷

Though there have been reports that Web sites for the Muslim Brotherhood are regularly blocked, neither the official Web site for the Muslim Brotherhood, www.ikhwanonline.com, nor the unofficial www.ikhwanweb.com, were blocked when the testing was conducted.

A number of ISPs also offer optional filters that block pornography; TEData offers a "Family Internet" plan that filters pornography and dating sites. Some of these packages restrict blogs and other Web sites as well.²⁸

Conclusion

Internet users in Egypt have unfettered access to the Internet but the government monitors online activities and has prosecuted online writers. Bloggers have reported instances of harassment and intimidation on the part of security forces.

NOTES

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