Ethiopia

Opponents of the current political regime have increasingly used online media to criticize the government, and Ethiopia has responded by implementing a filtering regime that blocks access to popular blogs and the Web sites of many news organizations, dissident political parties, and human rights groups. However, the filtering is not comprehensive, and much of the media content that the government is attempting to censor can be found on sites that are not banned.

Background

Ethiopia's record on human rights and political openness took a turn for the worse after the legislative elections of May 2005. Though originally hailed by the U.S. State Department as "a milestone in creating a new, more competitive multiparty political system in one of Africa's largest and most important countries,"[1] the elections were quickly followed by protests and riots by opposition parties alleging voter intimidation and rigging by the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF).[2] Ethiopian police in turn arrested more than 10,000 people in Addis Ababa during the protests. According to Human Rights Watch, most were released within a month, but hundreds remained locked up. The government recently released 400 prisoners in March of last year, but it is unknown how many are still imprisoned.[3] The EPRDF continued its crackdown on opposition by arresting seventy-six "politicians, journalists, and civil society activists"[4] and charging them with "'treason', 'conspiracy' to overthrow the government and 'genocide.'"[5] In foreign affairs, Ethiopia is involved in a border dispute with Eritrea, the subject of a war between the two states from 1998 to 2000.[6] Ethiopia, on behalf of the U.N.-recognized transitional government of Somalia, has also

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
GDP per capita, PPP (constant 2000 international $) 896		
Life expectancy at birth (years)..............................42		
Literacy rate (% of people age 15+)....................................42		
Human development index (out of 177) 170		
Rule of law (out of 208).......................................150		
Voice and accountability (out of 208)..................................168		
Digital opportunity index (out of 180)..................................173		
Internet users (% of population) 0.2		

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

entered into conflict with the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC). The UIC is an Islamist group vying for control of Somalia.[7] Because of the rise of Islamist extremism in Somalia, the United States views Ethiopia as an important ally in the global war on terror. As a result, Ethiopia still receives the largest amount of U.S. aid in sub-Saharan Africa despite U.S. disapproval of the repression following the elections of May 2005.[8] Self-censorship in the media is driven by the fear of government reprisal. Foreign journalists have difficulties acquiring authorization to work in Ethiopia, and an Associated Press reporter was sent out of the country in early 2007 after "tarnish[ing] the image of the country."[9] The government has reportedly entered into censorship of blogs and opposition Web sites, though it officially denies doing so.[10]

Internet in Ethiopia

Ethiopia lags behind much of Africa in Internet availability and is currently attempting a broad expansion of access throughout the country, though efforts have been hampered by the largely rural makeup of the Ethiopian population and the government's refusal to permit any privatization of the telecommunications market. Only 113,000 people had Internet access in 2005, for

a penetration rate of 0.2 percent, one of the lowest in Africa.[11] The state-owned Ethiopian Telecommunications Corporation is the sole Internet service provider (ISP) in the country. Internet cafés are a major source of access in urban areas, and an active community of bloggers and online journalists now plays an important role in offering alternative news sources and venues for political dialogue. However, three-quarters of the country's Internet cafés are in the capital city, and even there access is often slow and unreliable.[12]

In 2005, Ethiopia announced plans to spend hundreds of millions of dollars over the next three years to connect all of the country's schools, hospitals, and government offices—and most of its rural population—to broadband Internet via satellite or fiber-optic cable.[13] Currently satellite Internet is available to some large corporations, but individuals are not permitted to have private satellite connections. The Ethiopian Telecommunications Commission (ETC) also bans the use of Voice-over Internet Protocol (VoIP) in Internet cafés and by the general population.[14]

Legal and regulatory frameworks

The Ethiopian government maintains strict controls over access to the Internet and online media, despite constitutional guarantees of freedom of the press and free access to information.

The state-owned ETC and the Ethiopian Telecommunication Agency (ETA) have exclusive control of Internet access throughout the country. The ETA is not an independent regulatory body and its staff and telecommunications policies are controlled by the national government.[15] It grants the ETC a monopoly license as Ethiopia's sole ISP and seller of domain names under the country code top-level domain, ".et". Internet cafés and other resellers of Internet services must be licensed by the ETA and purchase their access through the ETC.[16] Individual purchasers must also apply for Internet connections through the ETC. Though Ethiopia has considered some limited privatization of the telecommunications market, these plans are on hold indefinitely despite acknowledgments that the ETC has not been an effective service provider.[17]

In the face of political turmoil over the last two years, the ruling party in Ethiopia has become an increasingly active censor. In mid-2006 the government cut off access within the country to online publications run by political dissidents and to all blogs hosted by www.blogspot.com (the ETC claimed that the blockage was a technical glitch but offered no further explanation).[18] The government has also banned reporters for the state-run news agency from using the Internet at all and now frequently jails journalists, including online journalists, for charges including treason; most private news outlets have now been shut down.[19] The Committee to Protect Journalists named Ethiopia one of the top four jailers of reporters in the world in 2006.[20]

In late December 2006, the ETA began requiring Internet cafés to log the names and addresses of individual customers, apparently as part of an effort to track users who engaged in illegal activities online. The lists are to be turned over to the police, and Internet café owners who fail to register users face prison.[21] Bloggers believe that their communications are being monitored.[22] The state maintains the right to cut off Internet access to resellers or customers who do not comply with security guidelines. In practice, it has shut down Internet cafés in the past for offering VoIP services and other policy violations.[23]

ONI testing results

ONI conducted testing on Ethiopia's sole ISP, the ETC. The ETC blocking effort appears to focus on independent media, blogs, and political reform and human rights sites, though the filtering is not very thorough and many prominent sites that are critical of the Ethiopian government remain available within the country.

The prime target of Ethiopia's filtering is political bloggers, many of whom oppose the current regime. Ethiopia blocks all the blogs hosted at www.blogspot.com and at www.nazret.com, a site that aggregates Ethiopian news and has space for blogs and forums. Though many of the filtered nazret blogs are critical of the government, the scope of the filtering is wide: one blocked blogger wrote solely about the 2006 World Cup. The blogspot-hosted sites that are blocked include Ethiopian and international commentators on politics and culture, including popular blogs EthioPundit and Enset.

The Web sites of opposition political parties appeared to be a priority for blocking (www.kinijit.org, www.hebret.com, and others), as did pages for groups that represent ethnic minorities within Ethiopia (www.anaukjustice.org, www.oromia.org). Although women's rights groups in general were not filtered, the ETC did block one Web site aimed at connecting women involved in politics in Asia (www.onlinewomeninpolitics.org).

Many independent news sites covering Ethiopian politics or compiling international and local coverage were blocked, including Cyber-

Ethiopia, the Tensai-Ethiopia radio site, Ethio-Media, EthioX, and EthioIndex. But some media sites carrying news and editorials that are unfavorable to the Ethiopian government remained available, including Addis Voice and Ethiopian Review, which had been blocked as part of the ETC's initial filtering of blogs and media sites in 2006.[24] International news sites such as CNN and Voice of America radio were not blocked.

Some human rights sites focusing specifically on Ethiopia were filtered. The Ethiopian Democratic Action League, which advocates for political prisoners, was blocked, as was a page calling for the freedom of jailed opposition leader Yacob Haile-Mariam (www.freeyacob.com) and a site about the imprisonment of human rights activist Mesfin Woldemariam (www.mesfinwoldemariam.org). However, information about these and other imprisoned dissidents is available via a number of human rights pages that are not blocked, including Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and various Ethiopian-focused rights groups. Reporters Without Borders, which has chronicled Ethiopian Internet filtering on its Web site (www.rsf.org), is not banned.

ONI testing found that search engines, including Google, Yahoo, MSN, and others, were available in Ethiopia, and no e-mail sites have been blocked. Though VoIP has been banned within the country, sites offering that service, such as Skype, were not filtered. The ETC did not block censorship circumvention tools such as www.anonymizer.com, and Internet users within Ethiopia appear to have found alternative means of accessing banned sites.[25]

Conclusion

Ethiopia's current approach to filtering can be somewhat spotty, with the exception of the blanket block on two major blog hosts. Much of the banned political and human rights–related content is available at sites that are not blocked. The authors of the blocked blogs have in many cases continued to write to an international audience, apparently without sanction. But Ethiopia is increasingly jailing journalists and the government has shown an increasing propensity toward repressive behavior online; it seems likely that the trend will be more extensive censorship as Internet access expands across the country. When the ETC becomes more sophisticated as an ISP, its filtering regime may become broader and more comprehensive, particularly if the Ethiopian political situation remains unstable.

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