

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia has filtered the Internet since its introduction into the kingdom less than a decade ago. The filtering regime most extensively covers religious and social content, though sites relating to opposition groups and regional political and human rights issues are also targeted.



Background

Saudi Arabia is a monarchy without elected political institutions.¹ The ruling Al Saud family has presided over the Islamic nation and accumulated a poor human rights record. At times there has been increased discussion of sensitive subjects, such as political reform and women's rights, but despite explicit promises to improve the human rights situation, the government continues to maintain that such rights are subordinate to Islamic law and tightly limits political and religious freedom.² Religious police, *Mutawwa'in*, are charged with enforcing public morality. A wide range of media, including books and films, are censored or banned. Arbitrary arrests, prolonged detentions of political prisoners, corporal punishment, and the denial of basic conditions

for fair trials make for a bleak judicial landscape.³ Journalism is strictly controlled and journalists must exercise self-censorship in order to avoid government scrutiny and dismissal.⁴ Most Saudis get their information from foreign television and the Internet, and—though officially banned—dish receivers are becoming increasingly common.⁵ Al-Jazeera, a Qatar-based Arab satellite television station, is banned in the country, and foreign journalists are rarely granted visas.⁶

Internet in Saudi Arabia

The belated arrival of the Internet in Saudi Arabia, several years after its introduction into other Arab

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, 2004

countries, was largely the result of the government's concerns about regulating content. Since the year 2000, Internet usage has increased from less than 1 percent to more than 10 percent (over 2.5 million users) of the population.⁷ Telecom companies have begun taking advantage of the still relatively low penetration rate by unveiling 3G networks in the country.⁸ The government's Internet Services Unit (ISU), a department of the King Abdulaziz City for Science & Technology (KACST), has been responsible for overseeing Internet services in Saudi Arabia and for implementing government censorship.⁹ As its Web site explains, twenty-one licensed Internet service providers (ISPs) and one more not yet in service connect users to the national network.¹⁰ The ISU manages the link from the national network to international networks.¹¹ In accordance with a Council of Ministers decision, the Saudi Communications Commission was renamed the Communications and Information Technology Commission (CITC) and took charge of licensing and filtering processes previously managed by KACST.

Blogging has grown as a medium for expression in Saudi Arabia, with the number of bloggers tripling to an estimated 2,000.¹² Half of

these bloggers are women.¹³ In 2005 the government tried to ban the country's primary blogging tool, www.blogger.com.¹⁴ However, after a few days the ban was lifted, with the censors choosing to block specific content on the blogging Web site instead.¹⁵ Paralleling the increase in Internet use has been a proliferation of Internet cafés. As hourly rates can be too expensive for average Saudis, some Internet cafés offer monthly subscriptions that are more affordable.¹⁶ From time to time, the authorities have shut down Internet cafés for reasons such as "immoral purposes."¹⁷

Legal and regulatory frameworks

The government of Saudi Arabia allowed public access to the Internet only after it was satisfied that an adequate regulatory framework could be put in place. The authorities use Secure Computing's SmartFilter software for technical implementation and to identify sites for blocking.¹⁸ Furthermore, the expertise of local staff and input of ordinary citizens aid the filtering regime. The government makes no secret of its filtering, which is explained on a section of the ISU Web site.¹⁹ According to this Web site, KACST is directly responsible for filtering pornographic content, while other sites are blocked upon

request from “government security bodies.” The Web site also has forms by which Internet users can request that certain sites be blocked or unblocked. It has been noted by a KACST official that the majority of blocked Web sites contain pornographic content, and over 90 percent of Internet users have tried to access a blocked Web site.²⁰

In 2001 the Council of Ministers issued a resolution outlining content that Internet users are prohibited from accessing and publishing.²¹ Among other things, it forbids content “breaching public decency,” material “infringing the sanctity of Islam,” and “anything contrary to the state or its system.”²² The resolution also includes approval requirements for publishing on the Internet and mechanical guidelines for service providers on recording and monitoring users’ activities.²³

A new law, approved by the Saudi Shoura (Advisory) Council in October 2006, criminalizes the use of the Internet to defame or harm individuals and the development of Web sites that violate Saudi laws or Islamic values, or that serve terrorist organizations.²⁴

ONI testing results

Testing was conducted on two ISPs: National Engineering Services & Marketing (Nesma) and Arabian Internet and Communications Services (Awalnet). Both providers blocked the same Web sites, as expected given the centrally administered filtering system.

Testing indicates that the Web sites of Saudi political reformist and opposition groups, such as the Islah movement (www.islah.tv) and the Tajdeed movement (www.tajdeed.net), are targeted for blocking. In keeping with the Saudi government’s emphasis on protecting the “sanctity of Islam”²⁵—and the legitimacy of the regime—sites relating to minority faiths or espousing alternative views of Islam are blocked. These include the Web sites of a number of local Shiite groups.

The Web pages of a few global free speech advocates, such as Article19 (www.article19.org) and the Free Speech Coalition (www.freespeechcoalition.com), are blocked. However, filtering of human rights content primarily targets Saudi or regional organizations. All Web pages of the Saudi Human Rights Center (www.saudihr.org) are blocked. Although the main pages of the Arab Human Rights Information Network and the Arabic rights organization Humum are accessible, the Saudi sections of the two sites, www.hrinfo.net/ifex/alerts/saudi and www.humum.net/country/saudi.shtml, are not.

Most global media sites tested, including Israel-based news outlets such as the daily Haaretz (www.haaretz.com), were accessible. However, the Arab-language news sites Al-Quds Al Arabi (www.alquds.co.uk) and Elaph (www.elaph.com) were blocked.

“Immoral” social content continues to be a priority target for Saudi censors. Over 90 percent of pornographic Web sites and most sites featuring provocative attire or gambling that were tested were blocked. Numerous sites relating to alcohol and drugs, gays and lesbians, and sex education and family planning were also inaccessible. This pervasive filtering of social content is achieved through the use of SmartFilter software, which builds “blacklists” of sites from user-selected categories, such as Drugs, Gambling, Obscene, Nudity, Sex, and Dating. The substantial filtering of Internet tools, including anonymizers and translators, in Saudi Arabia is also achieved in this manner.

Conclusion

Saudi Arabia maintains a sophisticated filtering regime. Social content and Web-based applications are extensively filtered using commercial software. Additional political and religious sites are individually targeted for blocking. The result of this filtering system is consistent with the Saudi government’s express commitment to censoring morally inappropriate and religiously sensitive

material online. More generally, Internet filtering in Saudi Arabia mirrors broader attempts by the state to repress opposition and promote a single religious creed.

NOTES

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