

Yemen

Internet filtering in the Republic of Yemen is relatively broad in scope, with pornography a principal target for blocking. Despite the wide range of content censored, however, the depth of filtering in Yemen is inconsistent; many users of Yemen's primary Internet service provider (ISP) are not filtered when the user licensing quota in the filtering software agreement is exceeded.



Background

The press in Yemen operates under the careful eye of a government hostile to independent reporting on political and social issues. Newspapers have been closed and journalists have been arrested, interrogated, imprisoned, fined, and banned from publication for their coverage of sensitive topics; reports of threats and physical attacks are also numerous.¹

In 2005, the government and unidentified parties thought to be associated with government security forces intensified harassment of journalists and political critics. Human rights problems include limitations of citizens' ability to change the government, acknowledged torture,

significant restrictions on freedom of press and assembly, and some restrictions on speech.²

Internet in Yemen

Yemen lacks a robust telecommunications and information communications technology (ICT) sector. The International Telecommunication Union (ITU) estimates that less than 1 percent of Yemen's population uses the Internet (0.87 users per 100 inhabitants) and that only 300,000 PCs exist in the country (1.5 per 100 inhabitants).³ Many cannot afford and are simply unfamiliar with the equipment and services needed to access the Internet.⁴ Only 9 out of every 100 inhabitants is a telephone subscriber.⁵

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, 2006b; UNDP 2006; World Bank 2006c, 2006c; ITU 2006, 2004

Yemen is serviced by two ISPs: YemenNet, which is a service of the government's Public Telecommunication Corporation (PTC),⁶ and TeleYemen's Y.Net, which is part of the government's PTC but is managed by FranceTelecom.⁷

Businesses own 60 percent of Internet subscriber accounts, while government and educational institutions own only 3 percent of subscriber accounts.⁸ 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 less frequent (13 percent). Only 2 percent access the Internet from schools.⁹ By mid-2005, the number of Internet cafés in Yemen reached 736.¹⁰

Legal and regulatory frameworks

The Ministry of Telecommunication and Information Technology (MTIT) grants ISP licenses;¹¹ PTC, a branch under the MTIT, is responsible for the management and growth of telecommunications in Yemen.¹²

ISPs impose restrictions on the use of Internet services, preventing subscribers from accessing or transmitting certain content. The terms and conditions set by TeleYemen (aka

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."¹³ Also covered are customer responsibilities, including prohibitions on "sending any message which is offensive on moral, religious, communal, or political grounds" (6.1.1).¹⁴ 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).¹⁵ Finally, section 6.3.3 admonishes subscribers that TeleYemen will "report to the competent authorities, any use or attempted use of the Y.Net service which contravenes any applicable Law of the Republic of Yemen."¹⁶

Yemen's Press and Publications Law, passed in 1990, subjects publications and broadcast media to broad prohibitions and harsh penalties.¹⁷ This law theoretically establishes a press that "shall be independent and shall have full freedom to practice its vocation," but that 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."¹⁸

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. Press Cards can be revoked by the Ministry of Information without any reason given, and this revocation requires the former holder to leave Yemen unless they have an independent reason for residency.¹⁹

A recent example of the implementation of this law is the conviction and fine handed down in December 2006 to the editor of the Yemen Observer for reprinting the Danish cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad. The Yemen Observer's license was revoked and the newspaper was closed down in February 2006 for three months after republishing fragments of the Danish cartoons.²⁰ Interestingly, the Web site of the newspaper was not targeted or blocked by the authorities.

A new draft of the law, proposed in 2005, was rejected by the Yemen Journalists Syndicate (YJS) as even more repressive than the existing 1990 law.²¹ Despite a promise by the Yemeni president to reform the media laws and abolish imprisonment penalty in publishing offenses, Yemeni journalists are subject to violation by the government, the ruling party, opposition parties, and religious groups alike.²²

The draft law "ignored the question of the 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."²³

ONI testing results

ONI ran in-country tests in 2006 on Yemen's two ISPs, YemenNet and TeleYemen/Y.Net. We found significant differences between the two. Interestingly, YemenNet, the primary ISP, was found to block very few Web sites. Because these results were contrary to previous information and ONI studies, we repeated the test runs

from different locations using different connections but got the same results, which showed that YemenNet no longer filters as extensively as it did in the past. We investigated further and 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 the 150,000-plus 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 users circumvent the filtering software.

The second ISP, TeleYemen/Y.Net, also obtains its filtering software from U.S.-based Websense. However, Y.Net was found to block almost all of the Web sites containing pornography, provocative attire, sex education materials, and anonymizing and privacy tools. Search strings containing the word "sex" are blocked, as are some sites hosting gay and lesbian content, hacking information, and non-erotic nudity. The ISP also filters some religious conversion sites and a limited number of Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) and circumvention sites.

The only political Web site found to be blocked by Y.Net is www.soutalgnoub.com, which is run by a Yemeni opposition group. Other than this Web site, neither provider blocked any of the other politically-related sites on the testing lists. However, ONI monitored Web access in Yemen during Yemen's September 2006's presidential election and found that the government-owned YemenNet did block access to several independent news and political opposition sites, including Nass Press (www.nasspress.com), Al-Mostakela Forum (www.mostakela.com), and the Yemeni Council (www.al-yemen.org).²⁴

Conclusion

Extensive testing and analysis revealed no evidence that the Yemeni state is currently preventing citizens from accessing news or political content online. The availability of such content

should not, however, suggest tolerance for criticism or dissent, as attested by the state's treatment of journalists and its timely blocking of oppositional media sites during the 2006 presidential elections. The failures of the filtering system installed on Yemen's principal ISP likewise 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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9. Ibid.
10. Yemen News Agency (Saba) <http://www.sabanews.net/view.php?scope=f69b5&dr=&ir=&id=103280> (in Arabic).
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16. Ibid.
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19. Ibid.
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22. Arab Press Freedom Watch, More Press Freedom Violation Recorded in Yemen, <http://www.apfw.org/indexenglish.asp?fname=news%5Cenglish%5C2007%5C01%5C13203.htm>. See full report at <http://www.apfw.org/indexenglish.asp?fname=report%5Cenglish%5C2007%5C01%5C1014.htm>.
23. Mohammed Al-Qadhi, "Journalists reject draft press law," *Yemen Times*, <http://yementimes.com/article.shtml?i=837&p=front&a=2>.
24. See Arabic Network for Human Rights Information, "To exit integral competitive presidential elections: The Yemeni government restricts freedom of expression by blocking independent websites," September 11, 2006, <http://www.hinfo.net/en/reports/2006/pr0911.shtml>; *NewsYemen*, "Press and freedom of expression: The victims of Yemeni elections," September 30, 2006, http://www.newsyemen.net/en/view_news.asp?sub_no=4_2006_09_30_6360.