

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia filters Web sites related to opposition political groups, human rights issues, and religious content deemed offensive to Muslims. Pornography and Web sites containing LGBT content are pervasively filtered, as are circumvention and online privacy tools. Bloggers have been arrested and blogs and Web sites run by online activists have been blocked.



Background

Saudi Arabia is the birthplace of the Prophet Muhammad and the cradle of Islam. It embraces a strict interpretation of Sunni Islam and has a strong religious self-identity. Political parties are banned, and activists who publicly call for reform risk being jailed.¹ Journalism is strictly controlled, and journalists must exercise self-censorship in order to avoid government scrutiny and dismissal.²

Despite substantial Saudi investment in pan-Arab satellite television such as the Dubai-based MBC channels and the Bahrain-based Orbit Satellite Network, the media environment within Saudi Arabia is one of the most tightly controlled in the region.

RESULTS AT A GLANCE

Filtering	No Evidence of Filtering	Suspected Filtering	Selective Filtering	Substantial Filtering	Pervasive Filtering
Political				•	
Social					•
Conflict and security			•		
Internet tools					•

Other Factors	Low	Medium	High	Not Applicable
Transparency			•	
Consistency			•	

KEY INDICATORS	
GDP per capita, PPP (constant 2005 international dollars)	21,659
Life expectancy at birth (years)	73
Literacy rate (percent of people age 15+)	85
Human development index (out of 179)	55
Rule of law (out of 211)	87
Voice and accountability (out of 209)	193
Democracy index (out of 167)	161 (Authoritarian regime)
Digital opportunity index (out of 181)	75
Internet users (percent of population)	30.5

Source by indicator: World Bank 2009a, World Bank 2009a, World Bank 2009a, UNDP 2008, World Bank 2009b, World Bank 2009b, Economist Intelligence Unit 2008, ITU 2007, ITU 2008.

The kingdom's four television networks—including news channel Al-Ikhbaria—and its radio stations are operated by the state-owned Broadcasting Service of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (BSKSA), which is chaired by the Saudi minister of culture and information.³ Private television and radio stations are prohibited on Saudi soil.⁴ However, the minister of culture and information said in May 2009 that an official committee had been formed to study the draft privatization project of Saudi television and the Saudi News Agency, and that the Ministry of Culture and Information was considering granting a number of radio licenses.⁵

Blogging has grown as a medium for expression in Saudi Arabia, with an estimated 2,000 bloggers in 2006, half of whom are women.⁶ In 2005, the government tried to ban Blogger, the platform most often used by Saudi bloggers.⁷ However, after a few days the ban was lifted, with the censors choosing to block specific content hosted on the platform instead.⁸

In November 2008, Saudi activists launched for the first time a daring move to support a human rights campaign online and called for a two-day public hunger strike to protest the detention without charges of human rights activists. The campaign was highly publicized and received coverage from international media.⁹

In early 2009, Saudi Arabia was ranked by the Committee to Protect Journalists as one of the ten worst countries in which to be a blogger, citing the widespread self-censorship and local calls by influential clerics for harsh punishment for online writers who post content deemed heretical.¹⁰

Internet in Saudi Arabia

Since its creation in 1998, the state-run Saudi Telecom Company (STC) had been the sole provider of telecom services. However, in an effort to join the World Trade Organization (WTO), the government opened the telecommunication sector to competition

in 2002.¹¹ To enhance the information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure in the kingdom, STC started installation of IP-VPN service at various speeds of up to 2.5 Gbps.¹²

The telecom sector continues to grow with relative consistency. Service revenues have been climbing steadily at an annual average rate of nearly 15 percent since 2001. Despite high mobile revenues, the kingdom's broadband penetration rate of about 1 percent remains well below the world average of 5 percent and the 20 percent benchmark of developed countries.¹³ This situation, however, is likely to change as advanced ICT projects are introduced. These projects include STC's launch of a home fiber-optic service providing Internet speed reaching 100 Mbps for its clients in the kingdom.¹⁴

The government's Internet Services Unit (ISU), a department of the King Abdulaziz City for Science and Technology (KACST), has been responsible for overseeing Internet services in Saudi Arabia and for implementing government censorship.¹⁵ As its Web site explains, 25 licensed ISPs connect users to the national network.¹⁶ In accordance with a Council of Ministers decision, the Saudi Communications Commission was renamed the Communications and Information Technology Commission and took charge of licensing and filtering processes previously managed by KACST.¹⁷

Because of numerous restrictions on the public interaction of unrelated men and women and the limited roles of women in open society, the Internet has emerged not only as a popular means of socialization but also as one that is dominated by women. Reports estimate that two-thirds of Saudi Internet users are women.¹⁸ Some Saudis believe that cyberspace has encouraged people to lead "double lives," conducting themselves in a more conservative manner in the public eye while engaging in far more liberal behavior online.¹⁹

Legal and Regulatory Framework

Saudi newspapers are established by decree. Although pan-Arab newspapers are available, they are subject to censorship and tend to conform to the state's standards when contemplating the publication of sensitive content.²⁰ Public criticism of the Saudi leadership and the questioning of Islamic beliefs are not generally tolerated, but in the post-9/11 era and amid instances of internal militancy, a bolder and more candid approach has brought about at least some press and television coverage of more controversial topics.²¹ This approach remains limited, however. For example, in January 2008 the Ministry of Culture and Information imposed a nationwide ban on all live broadcasts from Saudi public television channels two days after disgruntled viewers phoned in to the Al-Ikhbariya news channel and made critical remarks targeting senior Saudi officials. The ban compelled Reporters Without Borders to call for a reversal of the government's action and the reinstatement of the network's director, who had been fired after the incident.²²

The Saudi government openly admits to filtering and explains its policy in a section of the ISU Web site.²³ According to this Web site, KACST is directly responsible for filtering pornographic content, while other Web sites are blocked upon request from "government security bodies." The Web site also has forms that enable Internet users to request that certain Web sites be blocked or unblocked. According to a KACST official, "The majority of blocked Web sites contain pornographic content, and over 90 percent of Internet users have tried to access a blocked Web site."²⁴ The censors rely on citizens, who send in roughly 1,200 requests a day to have Web sites blocked.²⁵

In January 2008, Saudi Arabia implemented 16 articles of a new law on the use of technology. Its provisions include penalties of ten years in prison and a fine for Web site operators that advocate or support terrorism; three years and a fine for financial fraud or invasion of privacy; and five years and a fine for those guilty of distributing pornography or other materials that violate public law, religious values, and social standards of the kingdom. Accomplices of the guilty parties and even those who are proven to have only intended to engage in unlawful IT acts can receive up to half of maximum punishments.²⁶

Providers and distributors of Internet equipment can also be held liable under the new law, including Internet café managers whose facilities are used to post content that infringes upon the "values" of the kingdom.²⁷

The new law was implemented amid global scrutiny of the landmark imprisonment of Saudi blogger Ahmad Fouad Al-Farhan, who was arrested by the Saudi government for violating "nonsecurity regulations." Al-Farhan is reported to have stated that he was arrested because he "wrote about political prisoners in Saudi Arabia."²⁸ Al-Farhan was freed after more than four months in prison.²⁹

The new law has also been applied in nonpolitical cases. For example, a court fined a young man 50,000 Saudi riyals (approximately USD 13,000) and sentenced him to 22 months in jail and 200 lashes after he was found guilty of breaking into a woman's e-mail account and stealing photos of her. The man threatened to post the photos of the woman on the Internet if she did not agree to have an affair with him.³⁰

In July 2008, the Saudi authorities reportedly refused to renew the residence permit of an Egyptian national who had lived in Saudi Arabia for 44 years for writing articles in newspapers and on the Internet that were critical of the Egyptian regime.³¹ The Arabic Network for Human Rights Information claimed that the writer's activities "only amount to writings about his concerns and opinions about Egypt and do not include any Saudi related matters."³²

In an unprecedented move, Saudi Arabia's National Human Rights Society announced attempts to have Web sites of Arab and international human rights organizations unblocked by the Saudi authorities.³³ The chairman of the society said that they are aware of the blocking of Web sites of Human Rights Watch, Reporters Without Borders, and the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information inside Saudi

Arabia. He added that “blocking these sites is tantamount to depriving Saudi Arabia of its rights as a member of the UN Human Rights Council” and that “blocking those websites violates clause 19 of the International Human Rights Declaration, which deals with freedom of expression and clause 23 of the Arab Human Rights Charter.”³⁴

In May 2009, 13 female Saudi journalists filed complaints with the Ministry of Interior accusing the local online newspaper *Kul Al-Watan* (All of the Homeland) of “defaming and distorting the image of the Saudi media.” The journalists said the online newspaper published an offensive report entitled “Saudi Women in Red Nights,” in which it alleged that prostitution, alcohol, and drugs have become widespread in Saudi society and that female journalists rely on illicit relationships with newspaper bosses to get support and fame. One of the female journalists accused the writer of taking advantage of an absence of censorship in online publishing in Saudi Arabia.³⁵ Shortly thereafter, the minister of culture and information announced that Saudi Arabia intends to enact laws, regulation, and legislation for newspapers and Internet Web sites. This regulation will require Saudi-based Web sites to get official licenses from a special agency under the purview of the Ministry. The minister said the proposed regulation aims to deter “dangerous” writing in newspapers and on Web sites.³⁶

Surveillance

Like many countries in the Middle East, the Saudi authorities monitor Internet activities. In March 2009, Internet cafés were ordered by the Ministry of Interior to install hidden cameras and provide a record of names and identities of their customers.³⁷

The Saudi religious police have also expressed an interest in practicing online surveillance. Members of the religious police (the Commission for Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice) asked the chairman of the Saudi Shura (Consultative) Council to enable them to have access to blocked Web sites, “to monitor immoral practices by visitors of these sites.”³⁸ The religious police have argued that some young people “get involved in negative practices away from the eyes of the Saudi authorities” on these blocked Web sites, and are therefore striving to put a stop to the “immoral practices” online.³⁹ The chairman of the Shura Council, however, questioned the legitimacy of the request and stated, “These justifications must be supported by clear evidence, otherwise there is no need for it.”⁴⁰

ONI Testing Results

The OpenNet Initiative conducted in-country testing on three ISPs: STC, National Engineering Services and Marketing (Nesma), and Arabian Internet and Communications Services (Awalnet). The three providers blocked the same Web sites, as expected given the centrally administered filtering system.

Using Secure Computing's SmartFilter software for technical implementation and to identify Web sites for blocking, the Saudi censors have increased the number of targeted Saudi political reformists and opposition groups. In addition to the previously blocked Web sites such as the Web sites of the Islah movement (www.islah.tv and islah.info) and the Tajdeed movement (tajdeed.net), the authorities have added more opposition Web sites to the block list. Examples include www.alumah.com and www.alhijazonline.com. Testing in 2008–2009 also revealed that the censors now target user-generated oppositional content such as the forum New Arabia (www.newarabia.org).

The ONI monitored in-country access to the blog of Saudi blogger Ahmad Fouad Al-Farhan, who was jailed for more than four months. His blog was found to be blocked during his arrest and continued to be blocked even after he was released from prison. Also, the ONI verified that the Web site of the Voice of Saudi Women (www.saudiwomen.net), now defunct, was indeed blocked in October 2008. The Web site, according to Reporters Without Borders, published a number of analytical reports about the status of women in Saudi society and has denounced impediments to women becoming effective actors in Saudi society.⁴¹

The ONI also found that the blog Saudi Christian (christforsaudi.blogspot.com) was blocked in Saudi Arabia in January 2009, after reports that Saudi blogger Hamoud Bin Saleh declared on his blog that he converted from Islam to Christianity. The ONI monitored the blog and found that it was removed in March 2009 for unknown reasons.

In keeping with the Saudi government's emphasis on protecting the "sanctity of Islam" and the legitimacy of the regime, a number of Web sites opposing each are also blocked. These include Web sites relating to minority Shia groups (www.yahosein.com), a Bahai site (www.bahai.com), and sites that espouse alternative views of Islam, such as the Web site of the Institution for the Secularization of Islamic Society (www.secularislam.org). Web sites that present critical reviews of the religion of Islam and try to convert Muslims to other religions were also censored (answering-islam.org, www.islamreview.com).

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.

The human rights Web site www.humum.net was found blocked in 2008–2009 testing, whereas only the page related to Saudi Arabia was found to be blocked in the previous phase of testing. The Web site receives complaints on human rights violations from Arab citizens and is run by the Cairo-based Arab Human Rights Information Network.

Most global media Web sites tested, including Israel-based news outlets such as the daily *Haaretz* (www.haaretz.com), were accessible. However, Web sites of certain prominent Arabic newspapers and news portals were blocked, including the Arab-language newspaper *Al-Quds Al Arabi* (www.alquds.co.uk) and the news portal Elaph (www.elaph.com). Access to Elaph was restored several months after testing.

“Immoral” social content continues to be a priority target for Saudi censors. The vast majority of pornographic Web sites that were tested were blocked, as were most of those featuring provocative attire or gambling. The 2008–2009 testing also showed that censorship has expanded to block Arabic-language Web sites containing explicit content.

Also blocked were numerous Web sites containing content relating to alcohol and drugs, gay and lesbian issues, and sex education and family planning. A substantial number of Internet tools, including anonymizers and translators, were filtered.

Conclusion

Saudi Arabia publicly acknowledges censoring morally inappropriate and religiously sensitive material, but the authorities also filter political opposition Web sites and resources on human rights issues. In addition, the state has introduced new surveillance measures at Internet cafés and announced plans to start a system that will require local Web sites to register with the authorities.

Saudi citizens have started to use the Internet for online activism, but the authorities have arrested several online writers and blocked their content. A local human rights group expressed interest in legally challenging the government’s censorship of human rights Web sites.

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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