

United Arab Emirates

The government of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) censors political and religious content and pervasively filters Web sites that contain pornography or relate to alcohol and drug use, LGBT issues, or online dating or gambling. Online privacy and circumvention tools, as well as some Web sites belonging to Nazis or historical revisionists, are also blocked. Additionally, legal controls limit free expression and behavior, restricting political discourse and dissent online.



Background

The UAE is a federation of seven emirates formed in 1971 after independence from Britain. Each emirate maintains a large degree of independence, and the UAE is governed by the Supreme Council of Rulers of the seven emirs of the emirates. Though the UAE is one of the most liberal countries in the Gulf, it was until December 2006 the only state in the region not to have elected bodies.¹

The UAE's economy continues to grow, but civil society remains stagnant, and human rights progress has been slow. Authorities have exerted censorship on a wide

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)	51,586
Life expectancy at birth (years)	79
Literacy rate (percent of people age 15+)	90
Human development index (out of 179)	31
Rule of law (out of 211)	64
Voice and accountability (out of 209)	160
Democracy index (out of 167)	147 (Authoritarian regime)
Digital opportunity index (out of 181)	37
Internet users (percent of population)	65.2

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.

range of activists, impeding the kind of vigorous monitoring and reporting that can draw attention to and help curb human rights abuses.² Although the prime minister decreed in 2007 that journalists should not face prison for “for reasons related to their work,” current media laws allow for the imprisonment of journalists and suspension of publication for publishing “materials that cause confusion among the public.” The government monitors press content, and journalists routinely exercise self-censorship.³

Though the emirate of Dubai has established itself as a regional and international hub for media in which there is a media zone authority that allows 100 percent foreign ownership and offers tax breaks, the Internet is filtered in this hub, as ONI test results show, and there are reports of other forms of censorship.⁴ For example, Dubai authorities interrupted the broadcast of two Pakistani television stations, Geo News and Ary One World, in November 2007. Geo News said the decision resulted from constant pressure by Pervez Musharraf, then president of Pakistan, who had at the time implemented a state of emergency in Pakistan.⁵ Dubai later allowed the two stations to resume broadcasting following negotiations with the Pakistani government and Dubai Media City.⁶

Internet in the UAE

According to a World Economic Forum report, the UAE continues to lead the Arab world in the adoption of information and communication technology (ICT)⁷ and is expected to spend about USD 3.3 billion on ICT hardware for schools, hospitals, and other civil projects for the period 2008–2011.⁸

According to the Internet Telecommunication Union, Internet penetration in the UAE has increased from 36 percent in 2006 to an estimated 65.2 percent in 2008.⁹ The Arab Advisors Group states account penetration to be at approximately 25 percent.

By the end of 2008, 11 percent of the total population had ADSL/broadband accounts. By the end of October 2008, the ISP Etisalat's ADSL accounts constituted around 36 percent of the operator's total fixed lines.¹⁰

Etisalat remains the dominant telecom provider, but in the interests of competition the UAE's Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (TRA) facilitated the launch of the Emirates Integrated Telecommunications Company, named Du. Established in 2007, Du is an integrated telecommunications provider that offers voice, data, and entertainment on mobile networks and converged broadband, television, and landline services.¹¹

Competition in the broadband Internet market is limited because the two ISPs still do not share each other's networks, and Du is unable to offer broadband Internet or landline telephone services outside of a handful of property developments in Dubai where it owns the physical telephone network.¹² Because Etisalat has been the sole telecom company for 30 years, it owns the national telephone network, based on both copper-wire and new fiber-optic cables.¹³

Legal and Regulatory Framework

A new draft media law is expected to be issued in 2009. The highest regulatory media organization in the UAE, the National Media Council (NMC), claims the draft law provides unprecedented provisions that protect and promote freedom of expression in the country. It also states that the draft law, "provides journalists freedom from coercion to reveal sources, reflecting the government's commitment to the journalistic right to protect sources; in this particular regard, the pending law's protection exceeds that of many advanced democracies, including the United States."¹⁴

The pending law, passed by the Federal National Council in January 2009, was rejected by the UAE Journalists Association because, according to the association's chairman, "It has nothing to do with the concept of media; it contains 45 articles which don't provide a proper description of the media's duties and rights. Similarly, there are 10 articles which talk about penalties and punishments."¹⁵

International advocacy groups have also expressed concerns over the draft law. Human Rights Watch argues that the pending draft law unlawfully restricts free expression and will unduly interfere with the media's ability to report on sensitive subjects, and that it includes provisions that would grant the government virtually complete control in deciding who is allowed to work as a journalist, as well as which media organizations are allowed to operate in the country. Human Rights Watch further states that while the new law contains some improvements over the draconian media law currently in effect, it will continue to punish journalists for such infractions as "disparaging" government officials or publishing "misleading" news that "harms the country's economy."¹⁶

The Committee to Protect Journalists has also expressed concern over the draft law in a letter they sent to the president of the UAE urging him to reject the law in its current form because, if passed, "it will negatively impact the state of press freedom in the UAE."¹⁷

The telecommunication services in the UAE are regulated by the TRA, which was established in 2003 by a federal law and is tasked with ensuring adequacy of telecommunications services throughout the UAE and establishing and implementing a regulatory and policy framework.¹⁸ The TRA is responsible for producing the Internet Access Management (IAM) policy, which outlines prohibited online content categories for ISPs. These categories include Internet tools for accessing blocked content, content providing information on criminal skills and illegal drugs, content containing pornography and nudity, gambling sites, Web sites for hacking and malicious codes, content offensive to religions, phishing Internet sites, Internet content that downloads spyware, Web sites providing unlicensed VoIP service, terrorism content, and prohibited top-level domain,¹⁹ apparently a reference to the top-level domain of Israel (".il"), which is blocked in the UAE.

The UAE government has issued a federal law on combating cyber crimes. Cyber-Crime Law No. 2 of 2006 considers any intentional act that abolishes, destroys, or reveals secrets or that results in the republishing of personal or official information to be a crime. Individuals may be imprisoned for using the Internet to defame Islamic places of worship and traditions, insult any recognized religion, or promote "sinful acts." Anyone convicted of "transcending family principles and values" or setting up a Web site for groups "calling for, facilitating, and promoting ideas in breach of the general order and public decency" may be jailed.²⁰

In August 2007, a court in the Emirate of Ras al-Khaimah sentenced the creator of Web site majan.net to one year in prison and a fine for defaming a local official. The court also ordered the site to be shut down. In September, the same individual received a five-month prison sentence and a fine in a second defamation case involving another local official, but was released on bail at the end of September 2007. Two months later, his two prison sentences were overturned by an appeals court after defamation complaints were withdrawn by the officials. In the end, he received a one-year suspended prison sentence after being convicted in a third defamation case.²¹

In April 2009, the chief of Dubai's police force denied allegations that Dubai Police had asked UAE's Telecommunication Regulatory Authority to censor Web sites. In earlier reports, the head of the Doha Media Freedom Center claimed that the Dubai Police had developed a list of 500 keywords, by which access to certain Web sites would be blocked.²² The police chief stated that the government did not attempt to censor Web sites critical of the UAE, that the 500 search terms were designed to shield UAE Internet users against pornographic content, and that they were proposed by the telecommunication regulators themselves, not the Dubai Police.²³ This denial came shortly after Dubai's police chief called for the blocking of the video-sharing site YouTube because,

he said, it contained religiously inappropriate content.²⁴ YouTube and Google have denied that they are engaged in plans to censor online content in the UAE.²⁵

Although Etisalat and Du conform to the TRA policies by automatically blocking Web sites that offer free VoIP services, individuals—including Internet café owners—have found ways of getting around the ban by using the Internet to make cheap international calls. Violators have been prosecuted. For example, a police officer in the emirate of Ras Al Khaimah warned several Internet café owners against the use of “illegal calling cards” for making inexpensive international telephone calls. Several violating cafés were referred to the police for investigation.²⁶

Surveillance

The authorities have established committees and electronic surveillance departments to monitor objectionable Internet activities. For example, a government committee was established in March 2009 to monitor Internet cafés in order to ensure that Internet connections in these cafés do not bypass filtering regimes set up by the two national ISPs, as per the regulations of the TRA. This move was in response to speculation that some Internet cafés provided unfiltered Internet connections using virtual private networks (VPNs).²⁷

In addition, an online surveillance team was set up by Dubai Police to carry out around-the-clock checks on the Internet. The team, known as e-police, investigated a total of 222 cases in 2008. The cases include 87 involving fraud and other financial crimes, 38 cases of illegal hacking, and 92 cases of defamation and extortion. The electronic patrol team has set up special forums and used assumed names in an attempt to collect information about potential criminal activity.²⁸ This online surveillance department announced in April 2009 that it managed to track down and later arrest women who promoted their sexual services online and publicized their Dubai phone numbers on Web sites. In addition, the surveillance team announced that it managed to track down individuals who offered inexpensive illegal VoIP services from their apartments.²⁹

ONI Testing Results

OpenNet Initiative testing in 2008–2009 revealed that the UAE’s censors have increased the scope and depth of Internet filtering.

One of the significant policy shifts that occurred during 2008–2009 testing is the implementation of TRA-mandated filtering by the ISP Du, which used to offer unfettered access to the Internet in the Dubai free zones, including Dubai Media City, Dubai Internet City, and the residential areas affiliated with the free zones. Du began filtering on April 14, 2008; 2008–2009 test results show that its filtering is almost as extensive as that of the other national ISP, Etisalat, which has the lion’s share of the market.

The two ISPs were found to block Web sites that express alternative political or religious views. For example, in addition to blocking UAE prison (uaeprison.com), a Web site hosting testimonials of former prisoners and critiques of the government's human rights practices, and the Web site of the U.S.-based Arab Times (arabtimes.com), the ONI found that the censors blocked the Web site "Save Zack Shahin" (www.savezackshahin.com), an online campaign calling for the release of U.S. citizen Zack Shahin from a UAE prison. The Web site encourages Americans to help him by sending letters to members of Congress. Shahin is a former chief executive of a Dubai property developer who in April 2009, together with a former UAE minister, was charged with seizing public money and harming state interests.³⁰

Another example is the blocking of the Web site UAE Torture (uaetorture.com), which posted video clips that allegedly show a member of the UAE royal family torturing an Afghan businessman. The story drew the attention of international media such as ABC³¹ and human rights advocates such as Human Rights Watch.³² Blocking of this Web site has been inconsistent, however: it has been found to be accessible and inaccessible at different times.

The UAE's censors are also apparently sensitive to content that is critical of the state of the local economy or society. For example, censors blocked access to the Arabic UAE blog Mujarad Ensan (mujarad-ensan.maktoobblog.com) in October 2008, a few days after the anonymous blogger published a post sarcastically entitled, "Laugh with Me and Say: Our Economy Is in a Good Condition." In the text of the blog post, he accused the UAE government of lacking transparency when dealing with the U.S. financial crisis and the local papers of lying about the real status of the local economy. The writer also accused government-owned real estate companies of publishing exaggerated information about business deals to create the impression that the local economy had not been negatively affected by the U.S. financial crisis. The ONI monitored access to the blog and found that it became accessible a few days later for unknown reasons.

Another example is the blocking of the blog Secret Dubai Diary (secretdubai.blogspot.com), which was also found blocked in 2006–2007 testing. Apparently, this blog was blocked because it offers a critical review of social life in the UAE.

Similar to 2006–2007 testing results, several Web sites presenting unorthodox perspectives on Islam (thequran.com, islamreview.com, secularislam.org) were blocked, along with a handful of Web sites promoting minority faiths (albrhan.org, ansarweb.net). Among the few Web sites considered "extremist" that are filtered in the UAE are hinduunity.org, which advocates Hindu solidarity and resistance to Islam, and kahanetzadak.com, a Web site devoted to the founder of the militant Jewish Defense League.

Testing conducted in 2008–2009 showed that censors have expanded filtering in these categories to include previously accessible Web sites such as the presumably UAE-based atheist blogs Ben Kerishan (benkerishan.blogspot.com), The Land of

Sands (thelandofsands.com), and Ben Short (benshort.blogspot.com). Also blocked are Wikipedia pages that contain information about religiously sensitive content such as *Fitna*, a film produced by Dutch politician Geert Wilders and considered by many to be offensive to Islam, and the Wikipedia page about the Islamic prophet Muhammad, possibly because the page displays drawings of the Prophet.

In March 2009, censors blocked access to the Web site Ahmed and Salim (ahmedandsalim.com), an Israeli Web site that posted video episodes considered offensive to Arabs and Muslims.³³ The UAE also blocked access to the YouTube links where the video clips appeared. The UAE's TRA ordered the blocking of the Web site and the YouTube links only a few days after the content appeared online, apparently because, in addition to the content perceived as offensive to Islam, one of the characters was dressed in traditional Gulf attire and the UAE flag appeared in several scenes.³⁴

Interestingly, several Web sites on Nazism, Holocaust denial, and historical revisionism were blocked. These include the Web site hitler.org and that of the Institute for Historical Review's publishing arm (www.noontidepress.com). Also blocked was the Web site vdare.com, which is often described as carrying anti-Semitic content. Meanwhile, the state continues to deny access to all Web sites on the Israeli country code top-level domain ".il."

Testing done in 2008–2009 also revealed that UAE filters still target social networking sites, video- and photo-sharing sites, bookmarking services, and blogging services. However, filtering of these Web sites has not been consistent. For example, Livejournal.com, a free service for blogging, was blocked in the UAE in June 2008, apparently because it was categorized as a dating site in the database of Secure Computing, a commercial filtering product. The UAE uses SmartFilter, a product of Secure Computing, to block access to various content categories including dating, pornography, sex, and gambling.³⁵ Access was restored a few weeks later.

Similar to 2006–2007 testing results, 2008–2009 testing revealed pervasive filtering of pornographic and LGBT content. The 2008–2009 results also revealed blocking of previously accessible Arabic forums, which are commonly used to facilitate the exchange of Arabic sexually explicit content.

Compared to 2006–2007 testing, fewer Web sites relating to sexual health education were found to be blocked. For example, previously filtered Web sites such as circumcision.org and sexualhealth.com were found accessible, though others in the same categories are still blocked. Some Web sites containing provocative attire (lingerie.com) were still filtered. Web sites promoting alcohol and drug use or facilitating online gambling or dating were also blocked in large numbers, and many Arabic-language dating sites or Web sites that target Arabic users (e.g., www.arablounge.com, www.gaymiddleeast.com/country/uaemirates.htm) have been added to the blacklist. Nudity, even if in an artistic context and nonerotic, is censored (an example is the Arabic magazine www.jasadmag.com).

Internet tools, including those which facilitate hacking (e.g., thesecretlist.com), anonymizers (e.g., anonymizer.com), and translation tools (Google Web site translator, not the text translator), remain substantially filtered. Similarly, numerous VoIP sites (Skype.com, www.pc2call.com) were still blocked in accordance with the national ban on such applications.

In October 2006, the UAE unblocked access to social networking and multimedia sharing sites, including YouTube.com, Flickr.com, Metacafe.com, and MySpace.com. However, sections of these Web sites containing objectionable material remain unavailable. The photo-sharing site Flickr (Flickr.com) was later blocked entirely.

Conclusion

The UAE continues to prevent its citizens from accessing a significant amount of Internet content spanning a variety of topics. Though the vast majority of Web sites filtered are those deemed obscene in some way, a select few political Web sites are blocked, as are some pertaining to Nazis, Holocaust denial, and historical revisionism. The entire “.il” top-level domain continues to be blocked as well, which is more indicative of the UAE’s opposition to the state of Israel than to the content.

Additionally, the state has extended its filtering scheme to the Dubai free zones, which previously enjoyed unfettered Internet access, and has increased the depth of technical filtering, blocking more Web sites across broader categories.

The UAE employs SmartFilter software to block content related to nudity, sex, dating, gambling, the occult, religious conversion, and drugs. Web sites pertaining to anonymizer tools, hacking, translation tools (as these have been used as proxies), and VoIP applications are also filtered in this manner.

Lastly, there are government efforts to monitor Internet activities in public Internet cafés to ensure that connections provided there do not bypass national filtering. Electronic surveillance to monitor objectionable online activities is publically acknowledged by the authorities.

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