

Libya

	2016	2017		
Internet Freedom Status	Partly Free	Partly Free	Population:	6.3 million
Obstacles to Access (0-25)	20	20	Internet Penetration 2016 (ITU):	20.3 percent
Limits on Content (0-35)	13	12	Social Media/ICT Apps Blocked:	No
Violations of User Rights (0-40)	25	22	Political/Social Content Blocked:	No
TOTAL* (0-100)	58	54	Bloggers/ICT Users Arrested:	No
			Press Freedom 2017 Status:	Not Free

* 0=most free, 100=least free

Key Developments: June 2016 – May 2017

- On several occasions, armed protestors stormed the offices of telecommunication providers to shut off internet access to rival cities in retaliation for alleged offenses (**Restrictions on Connectivity**).
- In July 2016, security forces released blogger Ali Asbali after he spent 120 days at Gernada prison in Benghazi. He had been detained and interrogated by unidentified men in military uniforms in March 2016 after highlighting a rise in kidnappings and extrajudicial killings in the country and criticizing General Khalifa Haftar (see **Prosecutions and Detentions for Online Activities**).

Introduction

Internet freedom improved this year in Libya due to a reduction in arrests, although network shutdowns continue as a result of coercion by rival political and military groups.

Libya remained plagued by a weak and fragmented central government. Foreign intervention, rival governments, and various militias have prevented the consolidation of power by any one entity. The Presidency Council, tasked with forming a new “Government of National Accord” after UN-sponsored peace talks, has been unable to exercise full control of state ministries based in Tripoli. Meanwhile, the council has not been endorsed by the House of Representatives, a rival body based in eastern Libya.¹ While there have been tentative steps towards reconciliation between political and military leaders, violence between cities, tribes, and ideological factions continues to hinder progress. In one positive development, militants from the so-called Islamic State group were driven out of the coastal town of Sirte by armed groups loosely affiliated with the internationally recognize government based in Tripoli.

The national crisis and lack of rule of law have had a devastating effect on internet freedom in Libya. Power and telecommunication services remain unstable across Libya, with increasingly frequent cuts due to high demand, infrastructure damage, and coercion by armed groups. For example, militias from the city of Khoms cut off electricity to Tripoli until one of their leaders was released in 2016.² Marking one of the most significant instances of online censorship since the revolution, the news site *al-Wasat* was temporarily blocked in February 2014 after it published articles that criticized the General National Congress and affiliated militias. Since then *al-Wasat* has been subject to cyberattacks, while print copies of *al-Wasat*'s newspaper have reportedly been seized by soldiers aligned with the self-proclaimed Libyan National Army (LNA), a group led by general Khalifa Haftar—a major military and political actor with influence in eastern Libya. In February 2017, *al-Wasat*'s affiliated radio station was raided by security force and briefly shut down.³ Militias routinely violate human rights with impunity, as evidenced by repeated kidnappings and assassinations of bloggers and activists in recent years. The polarized environment has led many activists and social media users to practice self-censorship.

In its initial stages, there were few instances of online censorship in Libya. However, it was not long until the regime of the late Muammar Qadhafi began to target opposition news websites, particularly after the lifting of UN sanctions in 2003 led to increased access to surveillance and filtering equipment. Since the overthrow and death of Qadhafi in 2011, the country has witnessed a flurry of self-expression, resulting in an increase in news sites and massive growth in Facebook use. However, the 2011 civil war and subsequent fighting has taken a heavy toll on the country's information and communications technology (ICT) sector, damaging infrastructure and sidelining an earlier US\$10 billion development plan that had been set to be complete by 2020. Meanwhile laws that once prohibited criticism of Qadhafi have been changed to outlaw criticism of the 2011 revolution that removed him. In short, the country remains plagued by significant obstacles to access and ongoing violations of users' rights.

1 For more details, see Crisis Group report no 170, “The Libyan Political Agreement: Time for a Reset,” November 4, 2016, <http://bit.ly/2hhfNLE>.

2 Saber Ayyub, “Khoms military leader released after electricity to Tripoli cut,” *Libya Herald*, March 14, 2016, <https://www.libyaherald.com/2016/03/14/khoms-military-leader-released-after-electricity-to-tripoli-cut/>.

3 Committee to Protect Journalists, “Libyan authorities in Tobruk knock radio station off the air,” March 6, 2017, <http://bit.ly/2mpfaTm>.

Obstacles to Access

Internet access has been badly affected by the ongoing conflict. Electricity outages and physical damage to infrastructure have limited connectivity. Quality of service has improved recently with almost double the average connection speed in 2016 compared to the previous year. While the ICT sector remains monopolized by state-owned entities, nonetheless, there has been a significant increase in the number of internet users, particularly among youth.

Availability and Ease of Access

Key Access Indicators		
Internet penetration (ITU) ^a	2016	20.3%
	2015	19.0%
	2011	14.0%
Mobile penetration (ITU) ^b	2016	120%
	2015	157%
	2011	164%
Average connection speeds (Akamai) ^c	2017(Q1)	2.1 Mbps
	2016(Q1)	0.7 Mbps

^a International Telecommunication Union, "Percentage of Individuals Using the Internet, 2000-2016," <http://bit.ly/1cblxxY>.

^b International Telecommunication Union, "Mobile-Cellular Telephone Subscriptions, 2000-2016," <http://bit.ly/1cblxxY>.

^c Akamai, "State of the Internet - Connectivity Report, Q1 2017," <https://goo.gl/TQH7L7>.

Internet penetration has traditionally been very low in Libya. According to figures from the International Telecommunication Union, internet penetration improved by one percentage point from 2015 to 2016, reaching 20.27 percent of Libyans.⁴

This rise may be correlated to better 3G coverage, the introduction of 4G LTE in March 2017, and lower prices. In 2016, LTT reduced the cost of its "MyFi" boxes—portable WiMax receivers that function as an on-the-go wireless connection. Some 350 telecommunications towers in 19 different locations provide WiMax and other internet services. WiMax subscribers make up the majority of total subscriptions in the country according to the latest data published by the government, with some 448,135 subscribers compared to 149,963 subscribers for ADSL and 76,885 for LibyaPhone.⁵ Broadband was introduced in 2007, although the number of fixed broadband subscriptions has declined every year since 2010 and now stands at just under 1 subscription per every 100 inhabitants in 2015.⁶ Since July 2014, WiMax service has been unstable in many parts of the country, especially in Benghazi and other cities in the east, partly due to the destruction of WiMax towers during fighting.⁷

Mobile phone use is ubiquitous, with just under 11 million mobile subscriptions in Libya, representing a penetration rate of 169 percent.⁸ Prices dropped precipitously after the introduction of a second mobile provider in 2003, resulting in greater affordability and opening the market

4 International Telecommunication Union, "Percentage of Individuals Using the Internet," 2000-2016, <http://bit.ly/1cblxxY>.

5 Data about internet users in Libya on: LPTIC, Facebook page, accessed May 10, 2015, <http://on.fb.me/1LnX6MM>.

6 International Telecommunications Union, "Fixed (wired-) broadband subscriptions," 2015, <http://bit.ly/1cblxxY>.

7 "The disruptions of the Internet services in Libya," [in Arabic] *Alwasat News*, accessed May 13, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1PGIJGq>.

8 Simon Kemp, We Are Social, Hootsuite, "Digital in 2017: Northern Africa," <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/digital-data-trends-every-country-world-simon-kemp>.

to competition, although both operators are still owned by the state-owned Libyan Post Telecommunications and Information Technology Company (LPTIC). As of mid-2017, the price of a prepaid SIM card from the main provider, Libyana, was LYD 5 (US\$ 4), compared to LYD 1,200 (US\$ 873) in 2003. Smartphones and 3G connectivity have been available since 2006.⁹ The service from Almadar, another mobile company, has been unreliable in the eastern part of the country since the 2011 revolution.

Similarly, the cost of a home internet connection remains beyond the reach of a large proportion of Libyans, particularly those living outside major urban areas. A dial-up internet subscription cost LYD 10 (US\$ 7) per month, an ADSL subscription was LYD 30 (US\$ 22) for a 20 GB data plan,¹⁰ and WiMax service was LYD 30 (US\$ 22) for a 15 GB data plan, after initial connection fees.¹¹ By comparison, Libya's gross domestic product (GDP) per capita, when calculated on a per month basis, was only US\$ 387 in 2015.¹² The price of one of the high-end WiMax receiver devices decreased in 2014 from 220 (US\$ 160) LYD to 190 LYD (US\$ 138)¹³ and a lower-end USB receiver device costs 90 LYD (US\$ 66). WiMax modems are in short supply, resulting in high prices for second-hand devices sold on the site Open Souk, Libya's online marketplace.¹⁴

Many foreign and Libyan organizations and individuals in need of reliable internet service have been driven towards two-way satellite internet technology. As two-way technology has become more popular, connection fees and equipment costs have lowered. Prices were recently at US\$ 525 for the hardware, while a monthly subscription costs US\$ 121 for a fast connection, depending on the number of users.¹⁵

Most people access the internet from their mobile phones—63 percent of web traffic goes through phones¹⁶—with computers in their homes and workplaces being the next most common point of access. The cybercafe industry was decimated in many parts of Libya; instead, cafes and restaurants partner with local internet businesses to offer Wi-Fi hotspots with different data plans. The adult literacy rate was last recorded at 91 percent and a wide range of websites and computer software is available in Arabic.¹⁷ However, limited computer literacy, particularly among women, has been an obstacle to universal access.

The Libyan civil war significantly disrupted the country's telecommunications sector. In the first years since the war, there were few improvements to ICT equipment, prompting frustrated Libyans to create the Facebook page titled, "I hate Libyan Telecom and Technology," which attracted over 25,000 followers.¹⁸ However, it seems that projects seeking to develop better ICT infrastructure are beginning to reap rewards, the most effective seeming to be the improvement of 3G mobile

9 "Libyana Introduces 3G Services for First Time in Libya," *The Tripoli Post*, September 26, 2006, <http://bit.ly/1GHB7ME>.

10 Libya Telecom & Technology, "Libya A.D.S.L: Packages & Price," accessed October 5, 2016, <http://www.ltt.ly/en/personal/adsl/index.php?c=63>.

11 Libya Telecom & Technology, "Libya Max: Libya Max 400," accessed October 5, 2016, <http://www.ltt.ly/en/personal/wimax/index.php?c=55>.

12 The World Bank, "GDP per capita (current US\$)," accessed October 4, 2016, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD>.

13 Libya Telecom & Technology, "Reduction in MyFi Prices", accessed October 5, 2016, <http://www.ltt.ly/news/d.php?i=239>.

14 See Open Sooq, <http://ly.opensooq.com/>; or Opensooq, Facebook Company Page, <http://on.fb.me/1PtWjgm>.

15 See Giga, <http://www.giga.ly/>; or Giga, Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/Giga.ltd> or <https://www.facebook.com/Giga.ltd/photos/a.411508128898799.86518.407758202607125/1123252627724342/?type=3&theater>

16 Simon Kemp, We Are Social, Hootsuite, "Digital in 2017: Northern Africa.", <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/digital-data-trends-every-country-world-simon-kemp>.

17 "The World Factbook," <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/2103.htm>.

18 See I hate Libya Telecom and Technology (LTT), Facebook Business Page, <https://www.facebook.com/ihateltt>.

telecom networks which was a major strategy goal announced by the ministry in spring of 2015.¹⁹ LPTIC announced an ambitious development program for improving the ICT infrastructure, including expansions of 4G, WiMax, and ADSL networks.²⁰ The country's first 4G- TE network was launched in March 2017.²¹ Meanwhile in June 2016, HANET, one of LPTIC's subsidiaries, announced that it had completed technical work to expand coverage of fixed wireless internet service for over 100,000 new people.²²

In October 2016, Italy and Libya completed an upgrade to an undersea cable in order to increase speeds to 100 Gbps.²³ Other upgrades have been proposed in an effort to respond to demands for increased capacity, such as the laying of the European Indian Gateway and Silphium submarine cables²⁴ (construction appeared to have begun on the Silphium cable by mid-2016),²⁵ the construction of additional WiMax towers,²⁶ the creation of Wi-Fi hotspots, the installation of a long distance fiber-optic cable within the country²⁷ and the development of next-generation broadband.²⁸ Although there have been many announcements of partnerships between Libyan telecommunication companies and foreign companies, such as Alcatel Lucent²⁹ and Samsung,³⁰ the status of these contracts are unknown, reflecting the lack of transparency in the Libyan ICT sector

According to Akamai, Libya had the world's lowest average connection speed in 2015 at 0.7 Mbps.³¹ While that has since risen 1.2 Mbps towards the end of 2016, Libya remains at the bottom three for connection speeds in the world.³² ICT experts say this is due to poor infrastructure, a lack of quality of service, technology constraints, and a continued lack of regulations. Furthermore, broadband is not widely available, bandwidth limitations exist for fixed-line connections, wireless users face slower speeds due to heavy congestion during peak hours, and there is a general lack of resources and personnel to perform maintenance and repairs.

19 See Libyan Ministry of Communications and Informatics official Facebook webpage in a post from March 9, 2015, <https://www.facebook.com/cim.gov.ly/posts/775894552507022>.

20 See LPTIC projects at <http://www.lptic.net/projects/>.

21 The Libya Observer, Libya Mobile Phone goes 4G LTE, <https://www.libyaobserver.ly/tech/libyana-mobile-phone-goes-4g-lte>

22 Sami Zaptia, Libya Herald, "Hatif Libya expands its fixed line wireless internet service Hanet for 110,000 new customers," June 29, 2016, <https://www.libyaherald.com/2016/06/29/hatif-libya-expands-its-fixed-line-wireless-internet-service-hanet-for-110000-new-customers/>.

23 Jason Mcgee-Abe, "Sparkle, LITC upgrade Italy-Libya cable to 100Gbps," Capacity Media, October 4, 2016, <http://www.capacitymedia.com/Article/3590816/Africa/Sparkle-LITC-upgrade-Italy-Libya-cable-to-100Gbps.html>

24 "The Activation of The New Upgraded Submarine Cable System between Libya and Italy," *The Tripoli Post*, December 25, 2011, <http://bit.ly/1jACXK6>.

25 LPTIC Facebook Post, July 16, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/LPTIC/photos/a.612688788829160.1073741828.612651818832857/980954825335886/?type=3&theater>.

26 "ZTE suggest Libya will boast nationwide WiMax network by Aug-13," *TeleGeography*, January 24, 2013, <http://bit.ly/1G6o1hd>.

27 "Italian Company to Install Fiber-Optic Network," *Libya Business News*, September 29, 2012, <http://bit.ly/RbnhMm>.

28 Tom Westcott, "Improving Libya's Internet Access," *Business Eye, Libya Herald*, February 2013, 18, <http://bit.ly/1LOQhHm>.

29 Callum Paton, "Alcatel Lucent to install high-speed internet link between Benghazi and Tripoli," *Libya Herald*, January 28, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1MBHnMc>.

30 Jamel Adel, "Internet services to get a boost with Al-Madar/Samsung agreement," *Libya Herald*, April, 16, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1LbiB3o>.

31 Akamai, "State of the Internet: Q1 2016," <https://www.akamai.com/uk/en/multimedia/documents/state-of-the-internet/akamai-state-of-the-internet-report-q1-2016.pdf>.

32 Akamai's "State of the Internet: Q3 2016."

Restrictions on Connectivity

Libya witnessed repeated shutdowns to internet service due to vandalism and politically motivated attacks on telecommunications infrastructure.

Two incidents illustrate the political use of ICT infrastructure to deny service to rivals. In July 2016, armed protesters stormed the offices of mobile phone companies TT and Libyana in Tripoli, demanding that operators shut down cell service to the entire city of Misrata. Protestors claimed the move was retaliation after Misratan militias allegedly forced GECOL, the national electricity utility, to redirect power from Tripoli to Misrata, resulting in power outages sometimes lasting 15 hours per day in the capital.³³ A similar incident occurred in January 2017, when protesters stormed the headquarters of mobile phone company Almadar, demanding service be cut to Misrata for similar reasons.³⁴

In a case of vandalism, large areas of southern Libya were cut off from their TT-provided mobile and internet connections in February 2017 after the theft of copper and other infrastructure equipment.³⁵ Similar cases were reported in other parts of the country throughout the coverage period.

The so-called Islamic State (IS), which built a stronghold in the coastal town of Sirte, has also destroyed communications infrastructure before it was driven from the town in late 2016. In August 2015, IS reportedly damaged a cable in Sirte that effectively cut off internet, landline, and some mobile phone communications linking eastern and western Libya,³⁶ although LPTIC stated that traffic was rerouted within a few days.³⁷ IS also disabled all phone networks in Sirte, banned satellite dishes, and regularly confiscated personal cell phones to check their contents.³⁸

ICT Market

The state-run Libyan Post Telecommunications and Information Technology Company (LPTIC), formerly the General Post and Telecommunications Company (GPTC), is the main telecommunications operator and is fully owned by the government. In 1999, the GPTC awarded the first internet service provider (ISP) license to Libya Telecom and Technology (LTT), a subsidiary of the state-owned firm.³⁹ Since the fall of the regime, 25 ISPs and 23 VSAT operators have been licensed to compete with state-owned ISPs. Many are based in Tripoli and have strong ownership ties to the

33 "Suq Al-Juma Protestors take over Libyana phone HQ, demand mobile services to Misrata be cut," *Libya Herald*, July 12, 2016, <https://www.libyaherald.com/2016/07/12/suq-al-juma-protestors-take-over-libyana-phone-hq-demand-mobile-service-to-misrata-be-cut/>.

34 Sami Zaptia, "Protesters storm Al-Madar calling for tit-for-tat mobile shutdown in revenge for long power cuts," *Libya Herald*, January 11, 2017, <https://www.libyaherald.com/2017/01/11/protestors-storm-al-madar-calling-for-tit-for-tat-mobile-shutdown-in-revenge-for-long-power-cuts/>.

35 "Copper thieves cut-off mobiles [sic] and internet in the south," *Libya Herald*, February 27, 2017, <https://www.libyaherald.com/2017/02/27/copper-thieves-cut-off-mobiles-and-internet-in-the-south>.

36 "IS stops phone communications between west, east and south Libya: report," *Libya Herald*, August 26, 2015, <https://www.libyaherald.com/2015/08/26/is-stops-phone-communications-between-west-east-and-south-libya-report/>.

37 LPTIC Facebook statement, August 29, 2015. <https://www.facebook.com/LPTIC/posts/805337812897589>.

38 "We feel we are cursed": Life under ISIS in Sirte, Libya," Human Rights Watch, May 18, 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/05/18/we-feel-we-are-cursed/life-under-isis-sirte-libya>.

39 United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, "The Status of Information for Development Activities in North Africa," (paper presented at the twentieth meeting of the Intergovernmental committee of experts, Tangier, Morocco, April 13-15, 2005) <http://bit.ly/1X4OjAG>; OpenNet Initiative, "Internet Filtering in Libya - 2006/2007," <http://bit.ly/1LbkQDM>; "Telecoms in Libya," [in Arabic] Marefa, accessed August 30, 2012, <http://bit.ly/1jAL3Cu>.

government. LPTIC owns two mobile phone providers, Almadar and Libyana, while a third provider, Libya Phone, is owned by LTT.

However, LPTIC has been affected by the country's political crisis and de facto split. Separate offices were established in Malta (representing the Tobruk government) and Tripoli (representing the Tripoli government).⁴⁰ However, progress has been made in reuniting the agency, with LPTIC announcing in January 2017 that divisions between its board of directors had been resolved in a court case.⁴¹

There has been a noticeable increase in the number of companies and agencies working to provide alternative methods to connect to the internet, such as through satellites (VSAT).⁴² On the other hand, there have been few developments within the mobile market. Although there were plans to put Almadar on the stock exchange and to issue the country's first tender for a private mobile license, the country has yet to witness any significant liberalization in the sector.⁴³

Regulatory Bodies

Libya's regulatory environment is plagued by ongoing disputes over the country's political governance. The ICT regulator is the General Authority of Communications and Informatics (GACI), formerly known as the General Telecom Authority (GTA). During the Qadhafi era, decisions on licensing were made by the government-controlled GPTC (now Libyan Post Telecommunications and Information Technology Company, LPTIC).⁴⁴ After the revolution, the transitional government established the Ministry of Communications and Informatics to oversee the country's telecommunications sector. Officially, the ministry runs the sector through two main bodies: LPTI and GACI. GACI is nominally responsible for policymaking and regulations, while LPTIC is a holding company for all telecommunications service providers in the country. Libya's top-level domain, ".ly," falls under the responsibility of LTT. Registrations are handled by Register.ly⁴⁵ on behalf of NIC.ly.⁴⁶

In 2014, the Ministry of Communications and Informatics appointed a committee to draft a new Telecommunication Act to set standards for the sector and replace the existing regulations surrounding ICTs. The act, which has been drafted but not yet implemented,⁴⁷ will also aim to create an independent Telecommunication Regulatory Authority (TRA) to oversee the industry.⁴⁸

40 Sami Zaptia, "Libya's State Telecoms Sector Agrees to Reunify its board under the GNA," *Libya Herald*, June 24, 2016, <https://www.libyaherald.com/2016/06/24/libyas-state-telecoms-sector-agrees-to-reunify-its-board-under-the-gna/>.

41 LPTIC Website, "Court order ends legal dispute over the legitimacy of LPTIC's Board of Directors," January 27, 2017, <http://www.lptic.net/media/press-releases/2017/court-order-ends-legal-dispute-over-the-legitimacy-of-lptics-board-of-directors/>.

42 Satellite Providers, "Internet Providers in Libya," accessed July 12, 2015, <http://www.satproviders.com/en/list-of-all-services/LIBYA>.

43 Reuters, "Mobile operators Libyana to be floated," *Libya Business News*, September 18, 2013, <http://bit.ly/1VT5nuV>.

44 Ministry of Justice, "the establishment of the GPTC," [in Arabic] accessed July, 9, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1OSyXk3>.

45 Register.ly, <http://register.ly>.

46 NIC, <http://nic.ly/ar/index.php>.

47 Libya – Telecoms, Mobile and Broadband – Statistics and Analysis, Budde Comm, <https://www.budde.com.au/Research/Libya-Telecoms-Mobile-and-Broadband-Statistics-and-Analyses>.

48 The Ministry of Communication and Informatics, *Libyan National Frequency Plan*, accessed July, 10, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1Llbwck>.

Limits on Content

Limits on content are rare in Libya. The lifting of restrictions in 2011 resulted in a diverse online media landscape and an improved market for online advertising. Facebook, in particular, has become an important news source for many Libyans; many government bodies post official statements directly to the social network. Nonetheless, the quality of the content published on these platforms remains poor and highly polarized. Decades of oppressive rule and the continued threat posed by militias has contributed to a high degree of self-censorship among users, particularly on political issues.

Blocking and Filtering

There have been no reports of blocked websites in the country. The first instance of politically motivated blocking since the Qadhafi era was seen in early 2015 with the temporary blocking of the news site *al-Wasat*.⁴⁹

YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and international blog-hosting services are freely available. Some pornographic websites have been blocked since the end of the civil war based on a decision made by an ad hoc Temporary Steering Committee formed after the fall of Qadhafi and the liberation of Tripoli.⁵⁰ Prior to the war, “indecency” was prohibited by law but sexually explicit sites were never blocked. The LTT has not unblocked the content, perhaps due to the conservative outlook of some political factions vying for influence in the future of Libya. A 2006 law mandates that websites registered under the “.ly” domain must not contain content that is “obscene, scandalous, indecent or contrary to Libyan law or Islamic morality.”⁵¹

In February 2014, LTT blocked an additional set of pornographic sites and mistakenly blocked the Wordpress.com domain for a few days. It was unblocked following requests from Libyan bloggers.⁵² On April 18, 2015, Facebook was reportedly inaccessible for a few hours in some areas of Tripoli. LPTIC denied responsibility for the interruption, instead releasing a statement reiterating its commitment to free speech and insisting that the interruption had been caused by armed groups taking control of the LTT.⁵³

There is little transparency and no legal framework related to the blocking of websites in Libya, as regulations have yet to be formulated. Officially, all regulations from the Qadhafi era remain valid. When accessing a banned website, users are shown a message from the authorities noting that the site has been blocked.

Content Removal

Authorities do not frequently request private providers or intermediaries to delete content. Rather,

49 See “Organizations and media figures and human rights condemns blocking” [in Arabic] *Alwasat News*, April 8, 2015, accessed May 11, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1G6sEbk>.

50 Libya Herald, “LTT blocks pornographic websites,” *Libya Business News*, September 13, 2013, <http://bit.ly/1k5lwki>

51 OpenNet Initiative, “Internet Filtering in Libya - 2006/2007,” <http://bit.ly/1LbkQDM>; “Regulations,” Libya ccTLD, accessed August 30, 2012, <http://nic.ly/regulations.php>.

52 Libyan Internet users reporting inaccessibility to their WordPress blogs; Nezar Abudayna, Twitter Post, February 10, 2014, 1:19PM, <http://bit.ly/1X4QVT3>; Abdulrazig Almansori, Facebook Post [in Arabic], February 10, 2014, <https://goo.gl/gOwxDF>.

53 See LPTIC’s Statement regarding the blockage of Facebook in Tripoli, LPTIC, Facebook Post, [Arabic] February 22, 2015, <https://goo.gl/PWAIG2>; In English, <https://goo.gl/iFDX1g>.

there are coordinated efforts to “report” Facebook pages for deletion, particularly for political views against militias. Separately, many Qadhafi-era government webpages containing information on laws and regulations from before the uprising are inaccessible, as is the online archive of the old state-run Libyan newspapers. Some of these websites may have become defunct after the officials running them were ousted or hosting fees were left unpaid, but others were likely taken down deliberately when the revolutionaries came to power.

Media, Diversity, and Content Manipulation

After a sudden opening of the online media landscape after the fall of Qadhafi, negative trends such as self-censorship, verbal harassment, and a lack of quality reporting now characterize Libya’s online sphere. The 2011 revolution brought a notable increase in the number of bloggers writing within Libya, particularly on issues related to political activism, hope for the future, and government criticism. However, a sizable number of Libyan bloggers, online journalists, and ordinary citizens continue to practice some degree of self-censorship due to continued instability and increasing threats and violence against journalists over the past years.⁵⁴ Social taboos such as mass allegations of sexual abuse by soldiers or conflicts between warring tribes and rival cities are off-limits. Online commentators also shy away from expressing religious opinions for fear of being marked as an atheist or a Shiite sympathizer, both of which can be life-threatening. Many commentators avoid criticizing the 2011 revolution, General Haftar, and various heads of local militias mainly out of fear of retribution from armed groups and nonstate actors.

Despite a recent growth in self-censorship,⁵⁵ the online media landscape remains much more diverse than under the previous regime, with few dominant news providers and several privately owned outlets. Many Libyans get their news through hundreds of Facebook pages dedicated to national or local level news events.⁵⁶ Some of these pages are affiliated with professional television, radio, or print news outlets, while others lack professional standards or operate largely as propaganda outlets for warring parties. These citizen-journalism pages are opaque about their methodology, ownership, editorial policy, or publishing guidelines.⁵⁷

The online advertising market has grown slowly and websites related to the Amazigh (whose language was banned under Qadhafi) and other minorities have flourished.⁵⁸ Interestingly, Facebook is often the platform of choice for city and even government officials to publish updates and official communication. The social networking site was third most visited website in the country after Google and YouTube and has become the main source of news about Libya for a large number of users inside and outside the country.⁵⁹

54 Reporters Without Borders, “2013 World Press Freedom Index: Dashed Hopes After Spring,” accessed in March 2013, <http://bit.ly/1bMr3Xz>.

55 “RSF urges Libya’s new prime minister to protect media freedom,” Reporters Without Borders, March 31, 2016, updated May 19, 2016. <https://rsf.org/en/news/rsf-urges-libyas-new-prime-minister-protect-media-freedom>.

56 See Fadil Aliriza, “Lack of media coverage compounds violence in Libya,” CPJ Attacks on the Press, April 27, 2015, <https://cpj.org/2015/04/attacks-on-the-press-lack-of-media-coverage-compounds-violence-in-libya.php>.

57 For a few examples see: <http://bit.ly/2qgdEkA>; <http://bit.ly/2rhrhE3>; <http://bit.ly/2r5lRKV>; or <http://bit.ly/2qgFkWg>.

58 Tracey Shelton, “Libya’s media has its own revolution,” *Global Post*, March 18, 2012, <http://bit.ly/1OwCwh3>.

59 Alexa, “The Top Sites in Libya,” accessed October 4, 2016, <http://www.alexa.com/topsites/countries/LY>.

Digital Activism

Over the past years, Libyans have used Facebook and Twitter to mobilize around a variety of causes. Recent campaigns include supporting peace and moves toward a unity government, promoting social justice causes, defending freedom of expression, and commemorating individuals murdered for their activism.⁶⁰ Since 2014, Libyan activists have promoted democratic values, campaigned against incitement, and dismissed propaganda on Facebook. Most of these campaigns started and spread through hashtags, reflecting the impact of hashtag activism on creating change in Libya. For example, a Facebook page and hashtag titled #مِل_ل_ي_ل_ا_ي_ب_ي_ل (Libya toward peace) sparked a national campaign.⁶¹ While social media continues to be a vibrant forum for discussion, there appears to be both a noticeable shift to less overtly political issues over the past few years, as well as a growing scepticism of the ability of digital activism to shape the political landscape amid the country's ongoing turmoil.

Violations of User Rights

Amid the ongoing constitutional crisis and weak rule of law, there were flagrant violations of users' rights in the country. Several online journalists have faced threats, detention, kidnappings, and in some cases violent attacks from militias. Armed factions carried out attacks with impunity, while appropriate oversight of the country's surveillance apparatus remained shrouded in doubt.

Violations of User Rights

Freedom of opinion, communication, and press are guaranteed by Libya's Draft Constitutional Charter, released by the Libyan Transitional National Council in September 2011.⁶² However, delays in the drafting of a constitution and the general absence of law enforcement have contributed to weak rule of law in the country.

Several Qadhafi-era laws remain on the books due to the absence of any significant legal reform in the country since the revolution, such as harsh punishments for those who publish content deemed offensive or threatening to Islam, national security, or territorial integrity. A law on collective punishment is particularly egregious, allowing the authorities to punish entire families, towns, or districts for the transgressions of one individual.⁶³ Because of their vague wording, these laws can be applied to any form of speech, whether transmitted via the internet, mobile phone, or traditional media.

When new laws have been passed, changes have been cosmetic. In February 2014, the GNC amended Article 195 of the penal code to outlaw any criticism of the 2011 "February 17 Revolution"

60 Brave New Libya (blog), "Hashtag activism, from the Digital World to the streets of Libya (Part II)," August 5, 2015. <https://bravenewlibya.wordpress.com/tag/ltt/>.

61 Brave New Libya (blog), "Hashtag activism, from the Digital World to the streets of Libya (Part II)," August 5, 2015. <https://bravenewlibya.wordpress.com/tag/ltt/>; see also Facebook page "Libya Toward Peace" <http://bit.ly/2duu6JG>.

62 Libyan Transitional National Council, "Draft Constitutional Charter for the Transitional Stage," September 2011, <http://bit.ly/1RIRpvc>.

63 IREX, *Media Sustainability Index – Middle East and North Africa 2005*, (Washington D.C.: IREX, 2006), 36, <http://bit.ly/1GdOOrH>.

or its officials, as well as members of the GN⁶⁴ using similar language to that used to outlaw criticism of Qadhafi's "Al-ateh Revolution."⁶⁵ The judiciary has gained in independence since 2012, when, in a landmark decision, the Supreme Court of Libya declared a law that criminalized a variety of political speech unconstitutional.⁶⁶ More recently, however, state bodies remain subject to pressure from a variety of armed militias.

Prosecutions and Detentions for Online Activities

There were no new reports of bloggers arrested for their online activities over the coverage period. In July 2016, security forces released blogger Ali Asbali after he spent 120 days at Gernada prison in Benghazi.⁶⁷ He had been detained and interrogated by unidentified men in military uniforms in March 2016 after highlighting a rise in kidnappings and extrajudicial killings in the country and criticizing LNA General Khalifa Hafter in his online posts.⁶⁸

Surveillance, Privacy, and Anonymity

Uncertainties remain over the actions of domestic intelligence agencies in the new Libya. LPTIC's involvement in political and security affairs remains vague among many Libyans, though it has made efforts to communicate better through increased press access and frequent press releases on its Facebook page.⁶⁹

A July 2012 report from the *Wall Street Journal* indicated that surveillance tools left over from the Qadhafi era had been restarted, seemingly in the fight against loyalists of the old regime.⁷⁰ Others suspect that these tools were activated to target those with an anti-Islamist agenda. During an interview on al-Hurra TV in March 2012, the Minister of Telecommunications stated that such surveillance had been stopped because the interim government wanted to respect the human rights of Libyans. An organization representing IT professionals in Libya refuted his remarks in an online statement, saying telecom sector employees had confirmed that the surveillance system was reactivated.⁷¹ Its status in 2016 was unclear. Given the lack of an independent judiciary or procedures outlining the circumstances under which the state may conduct surveillance, there is little to prevent the government, security agencies, or militias who have access to the equipment from abusing its capabilities.

The Qadhafi regime had direct access to the country's DNS servers and engaged in widespread surveillance of online communications. State of the art equipment from foreign firms such as the

64 Reporters Without Borders, "Free expression in new Libya approached with same draconian Gaddafi-era law," IFEX, February 19, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1RbDNYw>.

65 Amnesty International, "Three years on, Gaddafi-era laws used to clamp down on free expression," ReliefWeb, February 12, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1hF31SQ>.

66 Human Rights Watch, "Libya: Law Restricting Speech Ruled Unconstitutional," June 14, 2012, <http://bit.ly/1jpemlu>.

67 "Missing blogger and friends in Benghazi jail," *Libya Herald*, May 4, 2016. <https://www.libyaherald.com/2016/05/04/missing-blogger-and-friends-in-benghazi-jail-report/>.

68 "Asbali: During the 120 days in prison, from the moment of my arrest and until my release, I did not know the reason," *AlWasat News*, August 6, 2016. <http://alwasat.ly/ar/mobile/article?articleid=113936>.

69 "LPTIC confusion and political infighting, chairman abroad since summer," *Libya Herald*, January 29, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1Phs4tM>.

70 Margaret Coker and Paul Sonne, "Gadhafi-Era Spy Tactics Quietly Restarted in Libya," *Wall Street Journal*, July 2, 2012, <http://on.wsj.com/1jpeCY2>.

71 Libya Telecom & Technology, Facebook post [in Arabic], March 31, 2012, 7:16am, <http://on.fb.me/1LN9G5n>.

French company Amesys,⁷² and possibly the Chinese firm TE, were sold to the regime, enabling intelligence agencies to intercept communications on a nationwide scale and collect massive amounts of data on both phone and internet usage. Correspondents from the *Wall Street Journal* who visited an internet monitoring center after the regime's collapse reportedly found a storage room lined floor-to-ceiling with dossiers of the online activities of Libyans and foreigners with whom they communicated.⁷³

Intimidation and Violence

The breakdown of the rule of law and the growing influence of militias has resulted in a worrying uptick in politically motivated threats and violence against journalists and activists since the 2011 war.⁷⁴ While no bloggers or activists were reportedly killed for the online activism from late 2016 to early 2017, politically motivated killings from previous years have cast a shadow on online expression. In March 2016, civil society activist Abdel Basset Abu al-Dhahab was killed in a car bomb in Derna,⁷⁵ while Hamza Ahmed Abdel-Hakim, the rapporteur of the Libyan National Commission for Human Rights, was kidnapped in Tripoli in December 2015.⁷⁶ Meanwhile, the general trend of intimidation, hate speech, and incitement to violence on social media and other online platforms has escalated, according to the National Commission for Human Rights in Libya.⁷⁷

Militias and extremists have used Facebook to target and silence activists.⁷⁸ For example, in late 2014 anonymous users set up a Facebook page featuring the names, photos, and addresses of Benghazi activists and calling for their assassination and kidnapping. The page was taken down after online activists reported it.⁷⁹

Technical Attacks

Websites are highly vulnerable to cyberattacks in Libya, with prominent news sites such as *Libya Herald* employing protection measures against distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks. Anti-militia Facebook pages were consistently hacked or closed down after mass reporting by users, a significant concern given that most Libyans consider Facebook to be their main source of news.

72 Ivan Sigal, "Libya: Foreign Hackers and Surveillance," *Global Voices Advocacy*, October 26, 2011, <http://bit.ly/1k5L2qy>.

73 Paul Sonne and Margaret Coker, "Firms Aided Libyan Spies," *Wall Street Journal*, August 30, 2011, <http://on.wsj.com/1KvJDg>.

74 Human Rights Watch, "Libya: Investigate Killing Political Activist," July 26, 2013, <http://bit.ly/1LP2Kel>.

75 "Tributes and anger over 'assassination' of Libyan activist," *Middle East Eye*, March 17, 2016, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/anger-after-assassination-veteran-libyan-activist-516081195>.

76 "Human Rights activist freed by Tripoli militia," *Libya Herald*, July 8, 2016 <https://www.libyaherald.com/2016/07/08/human-rights-activist-freed-by-tripoli-militia/>.

77 Facebook page of The National Commission For Human Rights Libya, press release number 32, March 19, 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/nchr.ly/posts/1849577858663196>.

78 Nadia Burnat, "The attempt to silence Libya's activist generation," *Middle East Eye*, February 13, 2015, accessed on 13 May 2015, <http://bit.ly/1GHFuY0>.

79 See Radio France Internationale, "Mysterious Facebook 'hit list' causes uproar in Libya," Soundcloud, 4:02, <http://bit.ly/1MBU2Pt>.