SAUDI ARABIA

	2011	2012
INTERNET FREEDOM STATUS	**Not Free**	**Not Free**
Obstacles to Access (0-25)	14	14
Limits on Content (0-35)	27	26
Violations of User Rights (0-40)	29	31
Total (0-100)	**70**	**71**

* 0=most free, 100=least free

POPULATION: 29 million
INTERNET PENETRATION 2011: 48 percent
WEB 2.0 APPLICATIONS BLOCKED: No
NOTABLE POLITICAL CENSORSHIP: Yes
BLOGGERS/ICT USERS ARRESTED: Yes
PRESS FREEDOM STATUS: Not Free

INTRODUCTION

While the recent wave of protests and demonstrations in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has not changed the political landscape in the country as in other Arab countries such as Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, the internet freedom landscape in the Kingdom has no doubt changed considerably over the past year. Inspired by the Arab Spring events in 2011, millions of people in Saudi Arabia flooded social media sites such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter, and hundreds, if not thousands, participated in political campaigns to demand political, social, and economic reforms, fostering the emergence of innumerable political activists on social media.

However, as soon as Saudis went online to express their opinions, demand actions, and organize demonstrations, the Saudi government took immediate steps to respond to what it regarded as a national security threat. The government issued warnings banning protests, reminded people via email of the ban, and threatened the youth through the BlackBerry multi-media message service (MMS) to discourage them from participating in demonstrations. The authorities also detained and intimidated hundreds of online political activists and online commentators, implemented strict filtering mechanisms to block sensitive political content from entering the Saudi internet, recruited thousands of online supporters to warn against the call for protests and demonstrations as a counter measure, and continued to apply its excessive monitoring of internet users.

OBSTACLES TO ACCESS

Saudis first gained access to the internet in 1998. In 2011, 47.5 percent of the population had access to the internet, up from 19.5 percent in 2006, according to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU).[1] While in the early years, the vast majority of Saudi users accessed the internet through dial-up connections that were often slow and frustrating, less than 22.6 percent of the internet population still uses dial-up service today, with the rest using broadband connections.[2] There were 11.9 million mobile broadband connections and 2.2 million fixed broadband connections in the country as of May 2012.[3]

Internet penetration is highest in major cities such as Riyadh and Jeddah and in the oil-rich Eastern Province. Residents of provinces like Jizan in the south and Ha'il in the north are the least likely to use the internet. The younger generations make up the majority of the user population, according to the Communications and Information Commission (CITC).[4] Arabic content is widely available on the internet, as are Arabic versions of applications like chat rooms, discussion forums, and social media sites.

Monthly expenditure on broadband services ranges between 42 SAR (US$11) and 334 SAR (US$89) on average,[5] representing a sharp drop from the 2003 price of 700 SAR (US$187) a month.[6] That said, the cost of the internet is still considered high by the vast majority of those who participated in a CITC online survey who were predominantly male (95.3 percent) and between the ages of 20 and 39 (82.7 percent).[7]

Connection speed for broadband varies between 724 Kbps and 1.22 Mbps, depending on the service purchased (i.e. DSL broadband or High-Speed Packet Access networks). While the majority of participants in the CITC survey were not satisfied with their connection speeds[8] (possibly because of excessive filtering) and a large number of those surveyed

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[1] International Telecommunication Union (ITU), "Percentage of individuals using the Internet, fixed (wired) Internet subscriptions, fixed (wired)-broadband subscriptions," 2006 & 2011, accessed July 13, 2012, http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ICTEYE/Indicators/Indicators.aspx#. According to the latest statistics in 2012 by the Communications and Information Commission (CITC), there are 14.2 million internet users, for a penetration rate of 49.1 percent as of mid-2012. Internet Services Unit (ISU), "User's Survey," King Abdulaziz City for Science & Technology, 2006, accessed July 17, 2012, http://www.isu.net.sa/surveys-&-statistics/new-user-survey-results.htm.
[2] CITC, "ICT Indicators, Q1 – 2012."
[3] CITC, "ICT Indicators, Q1 – 2012."
[4] CITC, "The State of ICT Market Development in Saudi Arabia," Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2010, http://www.citc.gov.sa/English/Reportsandstudies/Studies/Documents/PL-PM-015-E-The%20State%20of%20ICT%20Market%20Development%20in%20Saudi%20Arabia.pdf.
[5] Ibid.
[6] ISU, "User's Survey."
[7] CITC, "The State of ICT Market Development in Saudi Arabia."
[8] Ibid.

planned to upgrade their internet speeds, overall infrastructure is not considered a barrier to access except in remote and sparsely populated areas.

The Saudi internet is connected to the international internet through two data-services providers, the Integrated Telecom Company and Bayanat al-Oula for Network Services, up from a single gateway in years past. These providers offer service to licensed internet service providers (ISPs), which in turn sell connections to dial-up and leased-line clients. The number of ISPs in the country has risen from 23 in 2005 to 36 in 2011.[9] Broadband and mobile phone services are provided by the three largest telecommunications companies in the Middle East: Saudi Telecom Company (Saudi Arabia), Etisalat (United Arab Emirates), and Zain (Kuwait). WiMAX, a technology that allows users to access the internet wirelessly from any location through a USB modem, is widely used in Saudi Arabia because it offers affordable prepaid broadband internet.

Saudis access the internet from home, from their place of employment, or in internet cafes, which offer a cost-effective alternative, though the latter option has become less popular because the availability of prepaid broadband has made it easier to access the internet from home, and internet cafes do not offer secure access. Many Saudis also access the internet from their mobile telephones. While there were fewer than 20 million mobile phone subscriptions only five years ago, there were nearly 54 million at the end of 2011, representing a penetration rate of over 191 percent.[10] Similarly, the average number of household mobile lines is estimated at 4.6 lines per household.[11]

All forms of internet and mobile phone access are available in the country, including WiMAX broadband, third-generation (3G), and fourth-generation (4G) mobile networks, internet via satellite, and High Speed Packet Access (HSPA) technologies. While smart phones like the iPhone and Galaxy tablets are banned at security organizations for fear of being targeted by hackers,[12] they are available to the public at affordable prices. Service for BlackBerry hand-held mobile devices, however, was banned from August 1-10, 2010 due to concerns over BlackBerry's encryption services,[13] but the ban was lifted after the company

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[9] CITC, "Annual Report, 2011" [in Arabic], Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2012,
http://www.citc.gov.sa/arabic/MediaCenter/Annualreport/Documents/PR_REP_007.pdf.
[10] International Telecommunication Union (ITU), "Mobile-cellular telephone subscriptions," 2011, accessed July 13, 2012,
http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ICTEYE/Indicators/Indicators.aspx#.
[11] CITC, "ICT Indicators 2011," Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2011,
http://www.citc.gov.sa/English/Reportsandstudies/Indicators/Indicators%20of%20Communications%20and%20Information
%20Techn/2011_ICT%20Indicators%20_English.pdf.
[12] "Saudi Arabia bans iPhones and Galaxy 'tablets' at security organizations," Al-Arabiya, July 15, 2011,
http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/07/15/157742.html.
[13] "Saudi Ban on BlackBerry from Friday," Al-Jazeera, August 4, 2010,
http://english.aljazeera.net/news/middleeast/2010/08/2010844243386999.html.

agreed to provide the Saudi authorities with the means to access the devices' encrypted messages.[14]

Major video-sharing, social-networking, and micro-blogging sites like YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter are freely available, as are international blog-hosting services. However, specific pages particularly on social media sites like YouTube, Facebook and Twitter are instantly blocked if they contain sensitive political content or call for people to join political campaigns and movements. One example is the "Constitutional Monarchy" page on Facebook, which was founded on March 5, 2011 by Ali Ashmlan and presumably blocked because it called for constitutional monarchy in the Kingdom, a taboo subject in Saudi Arabia. Another example is the Facebook page, "I want my rights…I don't want to drive," which called for reforms in public transportation for women to use instead of driving. The page was blocked for unknown reasons, according to Maha Al-Hadlaq, one of the group's members.[15]

Nevertheless, Saudis are among the largest adopters of Twitter in the Arab world, with 38 percent of all Arab tweets coming from Saudi Arabia.[16] Saudis are also well-represented on Facebook, with 4.9 million users and a penetration rate of 19.1 percent as of early 2012.[17] Similarly, millions of Saudis visit YouTube on a regular basis for alternative information on the country's current affairs that differs from official media.

The Internet Services Unit (ISU), a department of King Abdulaziz City for Science & Technology (KACST), is responsible for managing the internet infrastructure in Saudi Arabia and reports to the Vice President for Scientific Research Support. All retail ISPs, government organizations, and universities obtain access through the ISU. Established in 1998, the ISU initially acted as a regulatory body, but governance of the Saudi internet, including licensing issues, was relegated to the CITC in 2003. In addition to providing access to the internet, the CITC is responsible for regulating the broader information and communication technology (ICT) sector in the country.

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[14] Reuters, "BlackBerry Agrees to Give Saudi Arabia Subscribers' Codes" [in Arabic], Al-Arabiya, August 10, 2010, http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2010/08/10/116289.html.

[15] "Saudiat Atrhan national project an alternative to women driving a car" [in Arabic], AlAnba, June 23, 2011, http://www.alanba.com.kw/absolutenmnew/templates/print-article.aspx?articleid=206784&zoneid=194.

[16] "Saudis the biggest adopters of Twitter in the Arab world" [in Arabic], Sabq, January 25, 2012, http://sabq.org/dIbfde.

[17] "Facebook Statistics by country," Socialbakers, accessed February 6, 2012, http://www.socialbakers.com/facebook-statistics/?interval=last-week#chart-intervals.

LIMITS ON CONTENT

The Saudi government employs strict filtering over internet content, tightening its grip in 2011 and early 2012 following the revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and Syria due to fears of a revolution erupting in its own backyard. For this reason, specific pages particularly on social media sites such as YouTube, Facebook and Twitter that called for protests, demonstrations, or the release of prisoners were quickly blocked throughout 2011. Pages that demanded political, social, or economic reforms or basic human or civil rights were also blocked. More generally, sites that contain "harmful," "illegal," "anti-Islamic," or "offensive" material are routinely blocked, as are those that carry criticism of Saudi Arabia, the royal family, or other Gulf States. Material providing information about drugs, alcohol, gambling, or terrorism, and sites that call for political reform or that are critical of the current political landscape, are also regularly blocked.

While the rules governing internet usage are stated on government websites, allowing internet users to discern what is expected of them, the government blocking has become increasingly erratic. The OpenNet Initiative's most recent testing results showed that Saudi Arabia also blocks human rights websites like Article19.org, Saudihr.org, and Hummum.net.[18] In 2011, Saudi Arabia blocked the Amnesty International website because it leaked a draft of the proposed anti-terrorism law.[19] Saudi Arabia also blocks the websites of the human rights organizations, Reporters without Borders and Freedom House, as well as the websites of several Saudi religious scholars.[20] The country's two data service providers must block the sites banned by the CITC,[21] and failure to abide by these bans may subject the service providers to a fine of up to 5 million SAR (US$1.33 million), according to Article 38 of the Saudi Telecommunication Act.[22]

Filtering in Saudi Arabia takes place at the country-level servers of the two data service providers. These servers, which contain long lists of blocked sites, are placed between the state-owned internet backbone and servers around the world. All user requests that arrive via Saudi ISPs travel through these servers, where they can be filtered and possibly blocked. Users who attempt to access a banned site are redirected to a page displaying the message, "Access to the requested URL is not allowed!" demonstrating the government's partial

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[18] "Country Profile: Saudi Arabia," OpenNet Initiative, August 6, 2009, http://opennet.net/research/profiles/saudi-arabia.

[19] Jane Abell, "Saudi Government Blocks Amnesty International's Website," OpenNet Initiative, July 26, 2011, http://opennet.net/blog/2011/07/saudi-government-blocks-amnesty-international%E2%80%99s-website.

[20] Blocked websites of Saudi religious scholars include: www.almoslim.net, www.albrrak.net, and islamqa.info/ar. "Blocking some sites because they violate rules and spread bold ideas and theses" [in Arabic], AlArabiya.net, April 6, 2012, http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/04/06/205754.html.

[21] CITC, "General Information on Filtering Service," accessed September 30, 2010, http://www.internet.gov.sa/learn-the-web/guides/content-filtering-in-saudi-arabia.

[22] Telecommunication Act found here [in Arabic]: http://www.citc.gov.sa/arabic/RulesandSystems/CITCSyste/Documents/LA_001_%20A_Telecom%20Act.pdf.

transparency about the content it blocks, but the list of banned sites is not publicly available. The government also responds to take down notices from members of the public, who can alert the government to undesirable material,[23] and sites can be unblocked through a similar system designated for this purpose.[24] Once an individual submits a request to unblock a site by completing a web-based form, a team of CITC employees determines whether the request is justified. The manager of public relations at the CITC said the commission receives about 200 of such requests each day, but he would not comment on how often the CITC unblocks a site based on an appeal.[25]

The CITC claims that the time lost determining whether a user's site request should be blocked or allowed is not more than half a second. However, a survey conducted by the Commission in 2008 showed that 33 percent of internet users in the country, particularly younger participants and women, found content filtering problematic.[26] These users complained that filtering denied them access to a great deal of useful information and limited their ability to browse freely.

In addition to the blocking and filtering of websites, specific content on webpages is also subject to removal. For example, at least three YouTube episodes—two from the "Sa7i" channel[27] and one from the "3al6ayer"[28] channel—were removed because the videos' critical content had ostensibly crossed the "red lines." These limitations are in addition to the work of online forum moderators, or "gate-keepers," who preemptively delete content they deem inappropriate or inconsistent with the norms of society.

The Saudi blogosphere is not as active as other online platforms for political discussion in the country. For example, while there are an estimated 10,000 Saudi bloggers, most Saudis use online public discussion forums, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter to engage in political conversations. There are more female than male bloggers in Saudi Arabia, and most bloggers tend to focus on personal matters rather than local politics. With that said, some blogs in Saudi Arabia have become instrumental in shaping the political landscape in the country.

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[23] The CITC block-request form is available at http://www.internet.gov.sa/resources/block-unblock-request/block/view?set_language=en.

[24] The CITC unblock request form is available at http://www.internet.gov.sa/resources/block-unblock-request/unblock/.

[25] "About 300,000 requests to block sites in Saudi Arabia annually" [in Arabic], Ajl.com.sa, January 13, 2010, http://www.burnews.com/news-action-show-id-12100.htm.

[26] CITC, "Chapter 1: Individual," *Computer and Internet Usage in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia* (Riyadh: Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2009), 6-10.

[27] "Sa7i" channel, http://sa7i.com/shows/%D9%8A%D8%B7%D8%A8%D8%B9%D9%88%D9%86/%D9%8A%D8%B7%D8%A8%D8%B9%D9%88%D9%865?ctl00_phContent_gvItemsChangePage=2; Sa7ichannel, Twitter post, March 12, 2012, 8:17pm, https://twitter.com/Sa7ichannel/statuses/182682472453128192.

[28] "Idaat with Turki Al Dakheel" [in Arabic], AlArabiya.net, May 18, 2012, http://www.alarabiya.net/programs/2012/05/18/214916.html.

Internet users in Saudi Arabia, particularly those who upload humorous yet critical videos on YouTube, practice self-censorship online, which is often out of fear of "getting into trouble with the authorities," as the owner of the "3al6ayer" YouTube channel alluded to during an interview with the AlArabiya satellite station.[29] However, self-censorship is exercised mainly to avoid crossing red lines, thus it is possible to enjoy a modicum of freedom of expression online as long as the red lines are not crossed.

Another strategy the government employs to manufacture consent about its image is by being very active in online public discussion forums. The government also influences the news reported online by offering financial support to news sites such as Sabq.org in return for coordination between a site editor and the authorities. Blocking an online source from inside the country and thereby limiting the chances of making revenue from advertisements has also proven effective, as revealed by the owners of Al-Saha al-Siyasia who decided to close its website after 15 years in operation because of the block by Saudi authorities, which according to the owners, resulted in their financial ruin.[30]

Online public discussion forums enjoy immense popularity and receive unmatched attention from the public. Their effect on the political sphere has continued to be significant, even after the emergence of social media sites and blog-hosting applications. The forums give ordinary individuals from all backgrounds the opportunity to express themselves, steer the government's attention to their problems, and get their messages across even to the country's leadership. It is believed that the King responds swiftly to some of the demands made by online commentators and takes serious steps to meet those demands. For example, some of the decisions relating to the latest economic reforms, such as the recently introduced 2,000 SAR (US$533) monthly stipend for the unemployed,[31] may have been inspired by requests from members of Al-Saha al-Siyasia, the most popular online political forum in Saudi Arabia that is often read by the government to gauge public opinion or feel the pulse of the people. Nevertheless, Al-Saha al-Siyasia is not accessible from inside Saudi Arabia because of the sensitive nature of the topics discussed on it. Many Saudi internet users have become savvy at using circumvention tools such as Hotspot Shield,[32] which allows users to access a virtual private network (VPN) to bypass the proxies that block websites. Nevertheless, the blocked sites mean a great deal to many Saudis due to the dearth of other channels for free expression.

Social-networking sites like YouTube, Facebook and Twitter provide additional media platforms with minimal government control. For example, Saudis used YouTube very

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[29] Ibid.
[30] "The end: Alsaha says good bye" [in Arabic], Alsaha.com, June 28, 2012, http://www.alsaha.com/sahat/17/topics/303703.
[31] This welfare scheme, which was introduced in early 2011, is called Hafiz.
[32] Saudis call this circumvention tool, "proxy breaker."

effectively during the second major floods in Jeddah in 2011 that had resulted in several deaths. Users not only posted hundreds of videos capturing the tragedy as it occurred, but also demanded action from the authorities. In response, the King ordered immediate financial compensation for the flood victims.[33] The action was viewed as significant because it is not common in Saudi society to accept responsibility for natural disasters, which are believed to be coming from Allah. While YouTube was credited with exposing the gravity of the floods, many Saudis used Facebook to organize and assist with the rescue efforts, taking an important step toward greater civic and political activism in the country.

There are also Facebook groups that organize protests and demonstrations such as the "Hunain Revolution" page, which called for demonstrations in March 2011 that unfortunately failed to trigger a true revolution. Other Facebook pages include, "the National Campaign for Social Justice," "No Injustice After Today," and "Sit-in of 21/1/1433 H." The latter two Facebook groups organized country-wide sit-ins on February 23, 2012, though they had little effect because only a few people showed up to participate.

VIOLATIONS OF USER RIGHTS

Saudi Arabia's basic law contains language that provides for freedom of speech and freedom of the press, but only within certain boundaries. The 2000 Law of Print and Press addresses freedom of expression issues, but it largely consists of restrictions rather than protections. The government treats online journalists writing for newspapers and other formal news outlets the same as print and broadcast journalists, subjecting them to close supervision. Bloggers and online commentators who write under pseudonyms face special scrutiny from the authorities who attempt to identify and punish them for critical or controversial remarks. Online writers are often arrested and detained without specific charges, though it is frequently clear which views offend the government. The Ministry of Interior has generally enjoyed impunity for abuses against bloggers and online commentators.

In response to a series of hacking attacks, including one on the Ministry of Labor in 2008,[34] the government has enacted laws that criminalize a range of internet-based offenses. The vaguely worded legislation assigns jail sentences and fines for defamation; unauthorized interception of private email messages; hacking a website to deface, destroy, modify, or deny access to it; or simply publishing or accessing data that is "contrary to the state or its system." In addition, the Ministry of Culture and Information issued new legislation in

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[33] Yahya Hujairi, "An open financial account to cash all checks made for Jeddah flood victims" [in Arabic], AlEqt, February 19, 2011, http://www.aleqt.com/2011/02/19/article_505872.html.

[34] "Unemployed Man Hacks into Ministry of Labor and Parliament and Asks Private Sector to Employ Him" [in Arabic], *Al-Madina*, September 3, 2008.

January 2011 requesting all bloggers, among others, to obtain a license from the Ministry to operate online,[35] thus putting more pressure on political activists to self-regulate their content.

Many online commentators have been imprisoned under these laws after criticizing senior government officials or high profile members of the Royal Family. For example, when blogger Feras Bughnah produced a video describing poverty in Riyadh and uploaded it onto YouTube, he was instantly detained along with his colleagues Hosam al-Deraiwish and Khaled al-Rasheed.[36] The video was a part of a critical journalism series on YouTube called "Maloob Alaina" ("We have been cheated") and had been viewed 1.7 million times by the end of 2011. Feras and his colleagues were released after a couple of weeks in detention.[37]

Nevertheless, the success of humorous yet critical YouTube channels that mushroomed in 2011 indicates that there is room, within certain limits, for free speech in Saudi Arabia. There are now numerous comic channels on YouTube that use humor to address sensitive issues, including "3al6ayer," "La Yekthar," "Quarter to Nine," "Sa7i," "Masameer," "Eysh Elly," "Fe2aFala," and "Hajma Mortadda." One of the episodes on "La Yekthar" has received three million views, and many others have received up to two million views, suggesting that these channels enjoy widespread popularity. One reason for the success of these videos is their engagement in cautious rather than harsh criticism and their restraint against pushing the limits too far. While there have been no reports of arrests of anyone associated with the YouTube channels, at least three YouTube episodes were removed because the criticism crossed the red lines, as mentioned above.

On the other hand, while the government has seemed to tolerate the cautiously humorous form of critical journalism, critical journalism that broaches taboo issues such as encouraging women to drive are not tolerated. This issue came to bear in May 2011 when Manal al-Sharif posted a video of her driving on YouTube as part of a campaign to encourage women to get behind the wheel. She was consequently detained the next day[38] but released after ten days, likely as a result of the considerable attention she attracted worldwide.

Public vilification is still common in the country, despite the enactment of new legislation by the Ministry of Culture and Information that was specifically designed to curb defamation and libel. For example, at the end of the 2nd Intellectual Forum held in Riyadh in late

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[35] "Internet Enemies, Saudi Arabia," Reporters Without Borders, 2012, http://en.rsf.org/internet-enemie-saudi-arabia,39745.html.
[36] Amelia Hill, "Saudi film-makers enter second week of detention," The Guardian, October 23, 2011, http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/oct/23/feras-boqna-saudi-arabia-poverty.
[37] Ayman Badhman, "Maloob Alaina team has been released after their detention couple of weeks ago" [in Arabic], Sabq, October 30, 2011, http://sabq.org/UYZede.
[38] Siraj Wahab, "Manal Al-Sharif released," Arab News, May 31, 2011, http://arabnews.com/saudiarabia/article442275.ece.

December 2011, the attendee Saleh Al-Shehi tweeted that the widespread interaction he observed between male and female participants at the forum brought shame and dishonor to the culture, hinting that the event was about networking with women. His comment led to clashes among journalists and intellectuals on Twitter,[39] to the extent that the Grand Mufti during a Friday sermon criticized the site and accused it of facilitating the spread of lies. Nevertheless, no complaint was lodged against Saleh Al-Shehi in this instance. Later, Al-Shehi criticized the Saudi Finance Minister, who subsequently lodged a complaint against Al-Shehi at the Ministry of Culture and Information and won, requiring Al-Shehi to pay a 20,000 SAR (US$5,333) fine.[40] By contrast, no action was taken against an anonymous Twitter user under the nickname "Mujtahidd" when he/she launched a scathing attack on the high profile members of the Royal Family, providing very detailed descriptions of their corruption.[41] Nevertheless, it is believed that Mujtahidd is based outside the country since the government could have easily arrested him if he was writing from within Saudi Arabia. Mujtahidd has now more than 400,000 Twitter followers.

Online commentators who express support for extremism or liberal ideals, call for strikes, protests or demonstrations, argue in favor of the rights of Shiites and other minorities, call for political reform, or expose human rights violations are perceived as threats by the government. Although data on the exact number of those arrested is not publicly available, the Facebook groups that call for the release of political prisoners list hundreds of names of political activists in prison. Most of these Facebook groups emerged in 2011 after the success of the Arab Spring and include "National Campaign for Supporting Detainees in Saudi Arabia" and "Prisoner Until When?" demonstrating the increased engagement in civic and political activism in the country.

Surveillance is rampant in Saudi Arabia. Anyone who uses communication technology is subject to government monitoring, which is officially justified under the auspices of protecting national security and maintaining social order. The authorities regularly monitor websites, blogs, chat rooms, social media sites, and the content of email and mobile phone text messages. Users are not able to purchase mobile phones anonymously and are legally required to use their real names or register with the government. Furthermore, the authorities can obtain identification data from service providers without a court order or legal process.

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[39] MD Al-Sulami, "Intellectuals clash on Twitter," Arab News, January 1, 2012, http://www.arabnews.com/node/402740.
[40] "Ministry of Culture and Information judges in favor of the Minister Al Assaf against the journalist Al-Shehi" [in Arabic], Sabq.org, February 2, 2012, http://sabq.org/DWcfde.
[41] Roula Khalaf, "Daring Saudi tweets fuel political debate," Financial Times, March 16, 2012, http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/1749888e-6f5e-11e1-b368-00144feab49a.html.

The short-lived ban on BlackBerry services in August 2010, which ended when the government obtained the means to access the devices' encrypted messages, suggested that all other electronic media were already under the watchful eye of the authorities.[42] Moreover, the blocking of hundreds, if not thousands of YouTube channels, and Facebook and Twitter pages of human rights and political activists demonstrates the government's diligence in restricting content. The arrests of hundreds of human rights and political activists in 2011 are also indicative of the government's effective ability to monitor the Saudi internet.

In addition to direct government monitoring, access providers are required to monitor their customers and supply the authorities with information about their online activities. On April 16, 2009, the Ministry of Interior made it mandatory for internet cafes to install hidden cameras and provide identity records of their customers. The new security regulations also barred anyone under 18 years of age from using internet cafes. All internet cafes were ordered to close by midnight, and police were instructed to visit the businesses to ensure compliance. These measures were ostensibly designed to crack down on internet use by extremists, but in practice, they allow the police to deter any activity that the government may find objectionable such as calling for protests.

While in 2010, the authorities mainly targeted and arrested alleged extremists for their participation in online forums, in 2011, the attention and arrests shifted to human rights and political activists who the government feared would instigate an Arab Spring revolution in the country. The Ministry of Interior is believed to be the main government body responsible for monitoring extremist and political activists' content. The resulting arrests without formal charges have meant that detainees cannot defend themselves or secure legal representation. Some online commentators have reported that the authorities confiscated their computers and never returned them.

In 2011, the Ministry of Interior arrested several political activists and bloggers, including Fadhel Makki Al Manasif, Muhammed Salih Al Bijadi, and Mukhlif bin Khulaif bin Dahham AlShammari.[43] As of May 2012, Al Manasif and Al Bijadi were still in prison, while AlShammari was temporarily released and awaiting trial. Saudi Arabian authorities also detained Hamza Kashgari, a young Saudi writer, whose arrest was ordered by the King himself after Kashgari made several offensive comments on Twitter about the Prophet Mohammed. His tweets caused a huge uproar on social media and made thousands call for his execution, prompting him to flee the country to Malaysia. However, he was arrested at

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[42] Souhail Karam and Asma Alsharif, "RIM to share some BlackBerry codes to Saudis: source," Reuters, August 10, 2010, http://www.reuters.com/article/2010/08/10/us-blackberry-saudi-idUSTRE6751Q220100810.

[43] Adala Centre for Human Rights, *Freedom in Shackles*, May 2012, http://www.adalacenter.net/index.php?ext=1&act=media&code=books&f=72.

the Malaysian airport and later extradited to Saudi Arabia where he is still in prison as of May 2012.

Several websites and portals have been subject to cyberattacks in recent years including the official website of the Saudi Ministry of Finance.[44] In addition, hackers attacked the Facebook and Twitter pages of the satellite television station Al-Arabiya on April 24, 2012.[45] Even high-profile journalists' pages on Twitter, like Abdu Khal's, have been hacked.[46]

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[44] "Harsh punishment awaits Saudi Hackers" [in Arabic], AlArabiya.net, April 25, 2012, http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/04/25/210117.html.

[45] "'AlArabiya' retrieves its hacked accounts on Facebook and Twitter" [in Arabic], AlArabiya.net, April 24, 2012, http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/04/24/209849.html.

[46] "The Saudi journalist Abdu Khal page on Twitter were hacked" [in Arabic], AlArabiya.net, April 16, 2012, http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/04/16/208214.html.