

SAUDI ARABIA

	2009	2011
INTERNET FREEDOM STATUS	n/a	Not Free
Obstacles to Access	n/a	14
Limits on Content	n/a	27
Violations of User Rights	n/a	29
Total	n/a	70

POPULATION: 29.2 million
INTERNET PENETRATION: 38 percent
WEB 2.0 APPLICATIONS BLOCKED: No
SUBSTANTIAL POLITICAL CENSORSHIP: Yes
BLOGGERS/ONLINE USERS ARRESTED: Yes
PRESS FREEDOM STATUS: Not Free

INTRODUCTION

The government of Saudi Arabia is credited with supporting the rapid expansion of the internet through consistent upgrades to its infrastructure. However, by implementing strict filtering mechanisms to block undesirable content, excessive monitoring of internet users, and detention and intimidation of online commentators, the government has also been responsible for making the country one of the world's most repressive with respect to freedom of expression online.

Saudis first gained access to the internet on December 15, 1998. Ten years later, the number of internet users in the country had grown to 7.7 million.¹ Today, there are 9.8 million users,² making up about 38 percent of the total population. While in the early years the vast majority of Saudi users accessed the internet through dial-up connections,³ which were often slow and frustrating, only about half of the internet population still uses dial-up service, with the rest using broadband connections.⁴

¹ Communications and Information Technology Commission (CITC), *ICT Indicators in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2009* (Riyadh: CITC, 2010), <http://www.citc.gov.sa/NR/rdonlyres/ECC196FF-D3C1-4C88-B793-685C96CA0309/0/ICTSectorinKSA2009English.pdf>.

² Ibid.

³ Internet Services Unit (ISU), "User's Survey," King Abdulaziz City for Science & Technology, 2006, <http://www.isu.net.sa/surveys-&-statistics/new-user-survey-results.htm>.

⁴ CITC, *Internet Usage in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: Individuals* (Riyadh: CITC, 2008), <http://www.citc.gov.sa/citcportal/GenericListing/tabid/104/cmupid/{FD847314-8EAB-4A52-9B72-9470BC15320D}/Default.aspx>.

OBSTACLES TO ACCESS

Internet penetration is highest in major cities like Riyadh and Jeddah, and in 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 Technology Commission (CITC), older Saudis often lack the computer literacy to take advantage of the medium.⁵ Arabic content is widely available on the internet, as are Arabic versions of applications like chat rooms, discussion forums, and social networking sites. Broadband service costs 270 riyals (US\$72) a month on average,⁶ representing a sharp drop from the 2003 price of 700 riyals (US\$187) a month.⁷ Connection speed varies between 128 Kbps for DSL broadband users and 21.6 Mbps for High-Speed Packet Access (HSPA) network users, depending on the service purchased. Connections are considered slow by some, in part because of excessive filtering, but overall infrastructure is not considered a barrier to access except in remote and sparsely populated areas.

According to the CITC, nine out of every ten users access the internet from home, while one-third, mostly working men, access the internet from their place of employment.⁸ About 16 percent of the user population frequents internet cafes, which offer a cost-effective alternative. Saudis can also access the internet from their mobile telephones. While five years ago there were fewer than 20 million mobile-phone subscriptions, there are now 44.8 million, for a penetration rate as high as 175 percent.⁹

All forms of internet and mobile-phone access are available in the country, including WiMax broadband, third-generation (3G) mobile networks, internet via satellite, and HSPA technologies. Service for BlackBerry hand-held mobile devices was banned from August 1 to August 10, 2010, due to concerns that the authorities had difficulty accessing its encrypted messages,¹⁰ but the ban was lifted after the company agreed to provide the necessary information.¹¹ There are roughly 700,000 BlackBerry users in the country.¹² Major video-sharing, social-networking, and microblogging sites like YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter are freely available, as are international blog-hosting services, though specific pages may be blocked.

⁵ Ibid., 56.

⁶ CITC, *Internet Usage in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: Individuals*.

⁷ ISU, "User's Survey."

⁸ CITC, *Internet Usage in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: Individuals*.

⁹ CITC, *ICT Indicators in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2009*.

¹⁰ "Saudi Ban on BlackBerry from Friday," Al-Jazeera, August 4, 2010, <http://english.aljazeera.net/news/middleeast/2010/08/2010844243386999.html>.

¹¹ Reuters, "BlackBerry Agrees to Give Saudi Arabia Subscribers' Codes," Al-Arabiya, August 10, 2010, <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2010/08/10/116289.html> (in Arabic).

¹² "Saudi: 48 Hours for BlackBerry Messenger Providers to Try a Suggested Solution," Al-Arabiya, August 7, 2010, <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2010/08/07/115958.html> (in Arabic).

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. All the retail internet-service providers (ISPs), government organizations, and universities obtain access through the ISU. The entity was established in 1998 and reports to the vice president of KACST. In addition to providing access to the internet, the ISU initially acted as a regulatory body. However, in 2003 the governance of the Saudi internet, including licensing issues, was relegated to the CITC. The CITC is also responsible for regulating the broader information and communication technology (ICT) sector in the country.

The Saudi internet is connected to the international internet through three data-services providers, up from a single gateway in years past. These providers offer service to licensed 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 53 in 2009. 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 broadband, a technology that allows users to access the internet from any location using USB modems, is widely used in Saudi Arabia.

LIMITS ON CONTENT

The Saudi government subjects internet content to strict filtering. Sites that contain harmful, illegal, anti-Islamic, or offensive material are blocked, as are those that carry criticism of Saudi Arabia, the royal family, or the other Gulf states. Material providing information about drugs, alcohol, gambling, or terrorism, and sites that call for political reform or are critical of the current social landscape, are also blocked. While the rules governing internet usage are clearly stated on government websites, allowing internet users to discern what is expected of them, the Saudi authorities often disregard their own guidelines by blocking sites that are not explicitly covered. The OpenNet Initiative's 2009 testing results showed that Saudi Arabia also blocks human rights websites like Article19.org, Saudihr.org, and Hummum.net.¹³ Although the country's internet access now flows through three nodes—operated by the Saudi Telecom Company, Integrated Telecom Company, and Bayanat al-Oula for Network Services—instead of a single node as in the past, the three data-service providers must all block the sites banned by the CITC.¹⁴

Filtering in Saudi Arabia takes place at the country-level servers of the three data-service providers. These servers, which contain long lists of blocked sites, are placed

¹³ OpenNet Initiative, "Country Profile: Saudi Arabia," August 6, 2009, <http://opennet.net/research/profiles/saudi-arabia>.

¹⁴ CITC, "Content Filtering in Saudi Arabia," <http://www.internet.gov.sa/learn-the-web/guides/content-filtering-in-saudi-arabia>, accessed September 30, 2010.

between the state-owned internet backbone and servers in the rest of 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 that informs them of the site's status, meaning the government is at least partly transparent about the content it blocks. However, the list of banned sites is not publicly available, and the government also responds to takedown notices from members of the public, who can alert the government to undesirable material.¹⁵ Members of the public have the opportunity to unblock sites through a similar system designated for this purpose.¹⁶ 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 CITC is believed to receive hundreds of such requests each day.

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.¹⁷ These users complained that filtering denied them access to a great deal of useful information and limited their ability to browse freely.

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, many more Saudis use Facebook. There are more female than male bloggers in Saudi Arabia, and most bloggers tend to focus on personal matters rather than local politics. However, online public discussion forums have always been popular, and their effect has been quite significant. These online communities have continued to receive unmatched attention even after the emergence of social-networking and blog-hosting applications. The forums give ordinary individuals from all backgrounds the opportunity to express themselves and get their messages across even to the country's leadership. It is believed that the king fired several ministers for negligence, corruption, or incompetence in 2009 based on evidence posted on Al-Saha al-Siyasia,¹⁸ the most popular online political forum in Saudi Arabia. Countless other incidents have demonstrated the ability of online commentators to steer the government's attention to particular problems.

Sites like YouTube and Facebook provide additional media platforms with minimal government control. Saudis used YouTube very effectively during major floods in Jeddah in 2009, which resulted in 120 deaths. They not only posted hundreds if not thousands of videos capturing the tragedy as it occurred, but also demanded action from the authorities.

¹⁵ The CITC block-request form is available at http://www.internet.gov.sa/resources/block-unblock-request/block/view?set_language=en.

¹⁶ The CITC unblock request form is available at <http://www.internet.gov.sa/resources/block-unblock-request/unblock/>.

¹⁷ CITC, *Internet Usage in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: Individuals*.

¹⁸ Agence France-Presse, "Saudi Reshuffle Puts Woman in Ministry," *Australian*, February 16, 2009, <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/saudi-reshuffle-puts-woman-in-ministry/story-e6frg6tx-111118859647>; Al-Saha al-Siyasia is located at <http://www.alsaha.com/sahat/4>.

In response, the king immediately established a commission to investigate the disaster, which was apparently an unprecedented move. While YouTube was credited with exposing the scandal of the floods,¹⁹ many Saudis then used Facebook to organize themselves and assist with rescue efforts, taking an important step toward greater civic and political activism in the country.²⁰

Al-Saha al-Siyasia is not accessible from inside Saudi Arabia because of the sensitive nature of the topics discussed on it, and particular pages on YouTube and Facebook are also blocked. The sites nevertheless mean a great deal to many Saudis due to the dearth of other channels for free expression.

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 offended the government. The Ministry of Interior, headed by Prince Naif bin Abdulaziz al-Saud, 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 2008,²¹ 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 e-mail 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." Many online commentators have been imprisoned under these laws after harshly criticizing the government or expressing support for terrorism.

Critical journalism is not tolerated in the country. In July 2008, when the editor in chief of a local newspaper asked Prince Naif a question that contained implicit criticism of

¹⁹ Amira al-Hussaini, "Saudi Arabia: The Jeddah Floodings on Video," Global Voices, December 17, 2009, <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2009/12/17/saudi-arabia-the-jeddah-floodings-on-video/>.

²⁰ Paul Handley, "Outraged Saudis Blast Govt after Deadly Jeddah Flood," Agence France-Presse, November 28, 2009, available at <http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5ji17eEs80JpewJ4n0Py-7gQY5UTA>.

²¹ "Unemployed Man Hacks into Ministry of Labor and Parliament and Asks Private Sector to Employ Him," *Al-Madina*, September 3, 2008 (in Arabic).

the religious police, the prince scolded him and he resigned the following day.²² Anonymous online commentators commonly make defamatory remarks; while only a few choose to press charges against writers who publicly vilify them, it is understood that the government could arrest those writing from inside the country. In September 2010, the government announced its intent to require all online publishers and media, including bloggers and online forums, to obtain a license from the government.²³ The spokesperson of the Minister of Information and Culture claimed that the measure was necessary to curb defamation and libel.

Surveillance is rampant in Saudi Arabia. Everyone using communication technology is subject to government monitoring, which is aimed at protecting national security and maintaining social order. The authorities regularly monitor websites, blogs, chat rooms, as well as the content of e-mail and mobile-phone text messages. Users are not able to purchase mobile phones anonymously. They are legally required to use their real names or register with the government, and the authorities can obtain identification data without a court order or similar legal process.

The short-lived ban on BlackBerry service in August 2010, which ended when the government obtained the means to access the devices' encrypted messages, clearly suggested that all other electronic media were already under the watchful eye of the authorities.²⁴ Moreover, the blocking of the Twitter pages of two human rights activists, Khaled al-Nasser and Walid Abdelkhair, on August 20, 2009, demonstrated the government's diligence in restricting content, as Twitter is not particularly popular in Saudi Arabia.

Dozens if not hundreds of alleged extremists have been arrested after apparently drawing the authorities' attention through activity on online forums. The Ministry of Interior is believed to be the main government body responsible for monitoring extremist content. The resulting arrests without formal charges mean 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 addition to direct government monitoring, access providers are also 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 for 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

²² "Prince Naif Responds to the 'Spiteful' Journalist Ahmed al-Yousef," YouTube, July 4, 2008, video, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RB4JnaK-LZY&feature=related>.

²³ Alexia Tsotsis, "Saudi Arabians Will Soon Need a License to Blog," TechCrunch, September 23, 2010, <http://techcrunch.com/2010/09/23/saudi-arabians-will-soon-need-a-license-to-blog/#>.

²⁴ Reuters, "BlackBerry Agrees to Give Saudi Arabia Subscribers' Codes."

use by extremists, but in practice they allow the police to deter any activity that the government may find objectionable.

Several media websites and portals have been subject to cyber attacks in recent years. The website of the satellite television station Al-Arabiya was attacked in 2009 by a hacker seeking retribution for content deemed offensive to Shiites. The website of the newspaper *Al-Watan* was hacked twice in 2009 because of its criticism of religious scholars. Even high-profile online commentators' pages and forum accounts have been hacked. The Facebook pages of the prolific Saudi judge Eisa al-Ghaith have been disrupted several times. The forum account of well-known progovernment commentator Al-Bahbahari has also been hacked by critics of his loyalist stance.

Online commentators who express support for extremism or liberal ideals, call for strikes, 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 regime. Although data on the exact number of those arrested are not publicly available, several prominent bloggers and activists are known to have been detained in recent years. In 2007, the Ministry of Interior arrested the popular blogger Fuad al-Farhan because of his consistent advocacy for political reforms. He was released in April 2008. Between 2008 and 2009, the Ministry of Interior arrested bloggers including Youssef Ashmawy, Raafat al-Ghanim, Roshdi Algadir, Mohammed Otaibi, and Khaled al-Omair; most of these individuals have since been released. Munir al-Jassas, a Saudi activist and defender of the rights of Shiites, remains behind bars after being arrested on November 7, 2009. Another defender of the Shiite minority, Mekhlef bin Dahham al-Shammari, has been in custody since June 15, 2010, when he was arrested for criticizing political and religious leaders.