United Arab Emirates

The government of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) pervasively filters Web sites that contain pornography or relate to alcohol and drug use, gay and lesbian issues, or online dating or gambling. Web-based applications and religious and political sites are also filtered, though less extensively. Additionally, legal controls limit free expression and behavior, restricting political discourse and dissent online.

Background

The United Arab Emirates is ruled chiefly by a Federal Supreme Council, consisting of the hereditary leaders of the seven individual emirates. Although the UAE Constitution provides for judicial independence and guarantees freedom of speech, of the press, and of assembly, political interference and legal constraints undermine these provisions. Rulings by Islamic and civil courts are scrutinized by the government, and the foreign nationals occupying most judicial seats can be deported.[1] Print and electronic media are subject to the Press and Publications Law, which permits censorship of content by the state Media Council and prosecution under the Penal Code—for example, for publishing material that causes someone moral harm (Article 372), or for defaming someone without concrete evidence (Article 373). Journalists practice self-censorship, and newspapers often rely on the state's Emirates News Agency for material.[2] Although citizens can voice their concerns through channels such as the open councils (*majlis*), they do not have the power to transform the government or national law and are prohibited from criticizing their leaders.[3] Human rights activists have been detained and academics and critics barred from making their views public.[4] The government also controls Sunni and Shi'a

RESULTS AT A GLANCE					
Filtering	No evidence of filtering	Suspected filtering	Selective filtering	Substantial filtering	Pervasive filtering
Political			●		
Social					●
Conflict/security			●		
Internet tools				●	

Other factors	Low	Medium	High	Not applicable
Transparency		●		
Consistency	●			

mosques and monitors sermons for political commentary.[5]

Internet in the United Arab Emirates

The UAE is among the most highly Internet-connected countries in the Middle East. The UAE *Yearbook* for 2007 states that there are more than 578,000 Internet subscribers in the country.[6] September 2006 figures on Internet penetration place the number of Internet users at 1.40 million, or 35 percent of the population,[7] though Etisalat (Emirates Telecommunications Corporation)—the nation's primary service provider—estimates that more than 51 percent of the country is online.[8]

Since 1976, nearly all telephone and Internet service in the UAE has been furnished by the government-owned Etisalat—either through direct sale of subscriptions to customers or through commercial resale of Etisalat services via providers such as Dubai Internet City (DIC) telecom. With the release of the General Policy for the Telecommunication Sector (GTP) in 2006,[9] the UAE government moved to liberalize the telecommunications market, though it remains to be seen how competition will affect Etisalat's monopoly on telecom operations. The UAE Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (TRA) granted a twenty-year license to the Emirates Integrated Telecommunications Company (EITC)—more widely known under its traded name "du"—to offer fixed-line, mobile, and Internet services. Prior to liberalization, du served the Dubai free zone and a few affiliated residential complexes, providing unfettered Internet access in those areas, but acquisitions and partnerships with other telecom companies have expanded du's capabilities and customer base. du now aims to capture 30 percent of the UAE telecom market within three years.[10]

Legal and regulatory frameworks

Controls on Internet content in the UAE, actualized through filtering and other forms of enforcement, are geared toward safeguarding political, moral, and religious values. According to Etisalat, there is some evidence that these controls enjoy popular support. A 2002 survey found that 60 percent of Etisalat subscribers surveyed favored retaining the ISP's automatic filtering system, with 51 percent saying that it protected family members from objectionable content. In 2004, the UAE cited the survey as indicating that the role of filtering "in protecting users from offensive

material is considered to be an acceptable form of censorship."[11]

The mandate for technical filtering in the UAE derives from the TRA and is executed at the ISP level. Etisalat prohibits the use of its services for any "criminal or unlawful purpose such as but not limited to vice, gambling or obscenity, or for carrying out any activity which is contrary to the social, cultural, political, economical or religious values of the UAE."[12] Emerging competitor du is also moving toward compliance with the TRA's filtering policies. In January 2007, the company defended its decision to block the use of Voice-over Internet Protocol (VoIP) in the free zone, saying that TRA rules and guidelines mandated the ban.[13] This decision heralded a comprehensive plan to implement technical filtering throughout the Dubai free zone in 2007.[14]

The UAE government has also issued a federal law on combating cybercrimes. Cyber-Crime Law No. 2 of 2006 considers any intentional act that abolishes, destroys, or reveals secrets, or that results in the republishing of personal or official information, to be a crime.[15] Individuals may be imprisoned for using the Internet to abuse Islamic holy shrines and rituals, insult any recognized religion, incite or promote sins, or oppose the Islamic religion.[16] Anyone convicted of "transcending family principles and values"[17] or setting up a Web site for groups "calling for, facilitating and promoting ideas in breach of the general order and public decency"[18] may be jailed.

ONI testing results

ONI conducted tests on the UAE's two ISPs: Etisalat, which services most of the country; and du, which (at the time of testing) serviced only Dubai Media City, Dubai Internet City, and some residential areas associated with the free zone. To conduct the tests, ONI used dialup, broadband, and wireless connections. Access in the Dubai free zone was unfettered, while considerable filtering behavior was exhibited on the Etisalat ISP.

Testing in the UAE points to selective filtering of Web sites that express alternative political or religious views. www.UAEprison.com, a site hosting testimonials of former prisoners and critiques of the government's human rights practices, was blocked, as was the site of the U.S.-based *Arab Times* (www.arabtimes.com). Several sites presenting unorthodox perspectives on Islam (www.thekoran.com, www.islamreview.com, www.secularislam.org) were blocked, along with a handful of sites promoting minority faiths (www.albrhan.org, www.ansarweb.net). Among the few extremist sites filtered in the UAE were www.hinduunity.org, a site advocating Hindu solidarity and resistance to Islam, and www.kahanetzadak.com, a site devoted to the founder of the militant Jewish Defense League. Meanwhile, the state continued to deny access to all sites on the Israeli country code top-level domain ".il."

Testing revealed pervasive filtering of pornographic and gay and lesbian sites, which were extensively blocked. Web pages relating to sexual health (www.circumcision.org) and education (www.sexualhealth.com) or containing provocative attire (www.lingerie.com) were filtered to lesser degrees. Sites promoting alcohol and drug use or facilitating online gambling or dating were also blocked in large numbers.

ONI found substantial filtering of Internet tools in the UAE, including translation (www.systranbox.com), hacking (www.thesecretlist.com) and anonymizer (www.surfsecret.com) sites. Numerous VoIP sites (www.skype.com, www.pc2call.com) were blocked in accordance with the national ban on such applications. In October 2006, the UAE unblocked access to social networking and multimedia sharing sites, including www.youtube.com, www.flickr.com, www.metacafe.com, and www.myspace.com. However, sections of these sites containing objectionable material remain unavailable.

Conclusion

The UAE prevents its citizens from accessing a significant amount of Internet content spanning a variety of topics, though the majority of sites filtered appear to be those deemed obscene. Outside the free zones, the state employs SmartFilter software to block content such as nudity, sex, dating, gambling, cults/occult, religious conversion, and drugs. Sites containing anonymizer, hacking, translation, and VoIP applications are also filtered in this manner. The manual blocking of the entire Israeli domain is indicative of the government's political opposition to the Israeli state, rather than to the particular contents of the Web sites hosted there. Though most political sites and news sources are accessible throughout the country, a handful are blocked. It remains to be seen how severely the enforcement of TRA policies in the free zone and affiliated residential clusters will hamper access to Internet content and transform the traditionally unrestricted information environment in those areas.

NOTES

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2. Ibid., at 2.a.
3. Ibid., at 2.a.3.
4. Human Rights Watch, World Report 2007: United Arab Emirates, http://hrw.org/englishwr2k7/docs/2007/01/11/uae14724.htm.
5. U.S. Department of State, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices 2006: United Arab Emirates, at 2.c., http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2006/78865.htm.
6. United Arab Emirates Yearbook 2007: Infrastructure at 190, http://www.uaeinteract.com/uaeint_misc/pdf_2007/English_2007/eyb6.pdf.
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8. See Etisalat, About Us: Corporate Information, http://www.etisalat.co.ae/.
9. See General Policy for the Telecommunication Sector (GTP), http://www.tra.ae/NationalTelecom PolicyofUAE.pdf.
10. See United Arab Emirates Yearbook 2007: Infrastructure at 193, http://www.uaeinteract.com/uaeint_misc/pdf_2007/English_2007/eyb6.pdf.
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12. Etisalat (ecompany) Policies: Terms & Conditions, "Condition of Use" at 1(v), http://ecompany.ae/eco/isp/english/cs/policies/terms.html.
13. Gulf News, "du defends blocking of VoIP calls in free zones," January 29, 2007, http://archive.gulfnews.com/articles/07/01/29/10100242.html.
14. Gulf News, "Free zones to be put under official web filters," February 10, 2007.
15. Article 2, Cyber-Crime Law No. 2 of 2006, printed in Gulf News, February 13, 2006, http://archive.gulf-news.com/uae/uaessentials/more_stories/10018507.html.
16. Article 15, Cyber-Crime Law No. 2 of 2006.
17. Article 16, Cyber-Crime Law No. 2 of 2006.
18. Article 20, Cyber-Crime Law No. 2 of 2006.