GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2009

Focus on access to online information and knowledge
– advancing human rights and democracy

Global Information Society Watch 2009

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2009

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Dedicated to A.K. Mahan - an activist who valued intellectual rigour and concrete outcomes.

SAUDI ARABIA

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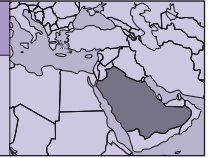
Introduction

Saudi Arabia has set itself two goals regarding the information society: dramatically improving skills and computer literacy; and becoming a centre of excellence in knowledge-based industries. This policy focus is an acknowledgment of how information and communications technologies (ICTs) now pervade every aspect of our lives. However, although the Saudi authorities are working hard in bridging the digital divide and liberalising the ICT market, its severe censorship of the net, and invasion of privacy at public access points, contradict its vision of a modern knowledge society.

Accessing technology in Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia's telecommunications sector is growing rapidly. Broadband access to the internet has become increasingly popular in recent years, although only 2% of internet users access the internet via broadband. Currently digital subscriber line (DSL) is the most common broadband technology deployed by service providers. While WiMAX technology and fibre-to-the-home (FTTH) are on their way, internet hotspots are already seen in shopping centres and restaurants. The country's two mobile services providers started to offer third-generation (3G) mobile data services in 2006.[1] However, Saudi Arabia still maintains a highly impractical ICT infrastructure in today's knowledge economy, with dial-up being the predominant source (98%) of internet connection.[2]

The number of internet users in Saudi Arabia reached 6.2 million in 2008.[3] Although this figure is large, the Saudi authorities still need to work hard on bridging the digital divide with over 77% of the country without access to computers. While the government's target is 30% penetration by 2013,[4] it still remains an extremely low target with respect to the country's demographics, given that over 60% of the population is under the age of 20.[5]

Government initiatives to build a knowledge society

The Saudi authorities are becoming more aware of the potential efficiencies from applying information technology to all sectors, including knowledge building. With high sales figures for computers, including personal computers (PCs), notebooks and accessories in 2008, the population's urge to become more "tech savvy" is apparent. The number of PC users in Saudi Arabia should also continue to rise steadily over the next few years, led by programmes such as the Saudi Home Computing Initiative (SHCI), which permits the purchase of computers at low prices and in easy instalment payment schemes.[6]

In an attempt to create better access to ICT services, the government has dealt with the three major challenges: physical infrastructure, education and awareness, and policy and regulation. In the 2009 budget report, the Saudi authorities signed off a USD 3.1 billion plan to improve the education system. The focus of this plan is to equip schools with the ability to compete in scientific and technological activities. This figure does not include the allocation of USD 2.4 billion to provide teachers with computer training.[7]

Another government scheme is the Smart City Initiative, which is one of the projects that support the modernisation of Saudi society to a new-age economy and knowledge society. The objective of the Smart City Initiative is to provide advanced e-services to businesses and the public at home and in public places such as airports, parks and hospitals. Its proposed vision is "to improve quality of life in the cities and catalyse economic development through ubiquitous broadband connectivity and compelling ICT services, supported by a true collaboration between the public and private sectors."

The Saudi government has an e-government programme. It has created a bilingual (Arabic and English) portal,[8] which is the main gateway to numerous Saudi public e-services.[9]

The government has also emphasised developing Arabic content websites and the use of Arabic domain names. This new initiative, entitled Developing Arab Digital Content, aims to encourage the production of Arabic web pages and thereby encourage internet usage.[10]

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1   International Telecommunication Union (2006) 3G switch-on for Saudi STC, *Regulatory Newslog*, 8 June. www.itu.int/ituweblogs/treg/3G+Switchon+For+Saudi+STC.aspx

2   Oxford Business Group (2008) *Country Business Intelligence Report: Saudi Arabia*, Oxford Business Group Publications, Oxford.

3   Internet World Stats (2008) *Saudi Arabia: Internet Usage and Marketing Report*. www.internetworldstats.com/me/sa.htm

4   Saudi Gazette Staff (2008) Value of Kingdom's IT market forecast to rise to $5.6 billion by 2013, *Saudi Gazette*, 15 May. www.saudigazette.com.sa/index.cfm?method=home.regcon&contentID=2009051538013

5   Wells, C. (2003) *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Understanding Saudi Arabia*, Penguin Group USA, p. 153.

6   The Saudi Network, Saudi Arabia's Cyber Marketing Network: www.the-saudi.net/business-center/saudi_it_market.htm

7   Business Monitor International (2009) *The Saudi Arabia Information Technology Report 2009*. www.businessmonitor.com/saudi_arabia_information_technology_report.html

8   saudi.gov.sa

9   Communication and Information Technology Commission of Saudi Arabia (2006) *Annual Report 2006*. www.citc.gov.sa/citcportal/Homepage/tabid/106/cmspid/%7B611C6EDD-85C5-4800-A0DA-A997A624D0D0%7D/Default.aspx

10 Telecommunication Insight (2007) Regulator Aims To Bridge Arab Digital Gap, May. www.telecomsinsight.com/file/44954/regulator-aims-to-bridge-arab-digital-gap.html

Building Saudi confidence in the use of ICTs

The Saudi government has tried to build public confidence in using ICTs by targeting the misuse of ICTs. However, it has a very limited number of laws and other legislation dealing with online safety and the protection of the rights and privacy of the individual using digital media.[11]

E-Transactions Act

This law establishes legal regulations for electronic transactions and digital signatures in order to build confidence and facilitate their adoption in the public and private sectors. It also consolidates the use of electronic transactions at local and international levels and advocates their use in commerce, medicine, education, e-government, e-payment systems, and other applications. This act should reduce cases of abuse and potential fraud in electronic transactions and digital signatures, such as forging and embezzlement.

E-Crime Act

This law combats electronic crimes and specifies the penalties and fines which violators would be subject to for hacking into other people's personal information or hacking websites. It also stipulates that defamation on the internet is illegal and is a punishable offence. Using the internet to acquire information illegally from public or private sources will be severely punished by fines or jail terms or both. However, the e-Crime Act is somewhat unclear and can be open to different interpretations, which could prove a setback.

Censoring the net

According to United States (US) President Barack Obama, "Suppressing ideas never succeeds in making them go away," and "[t]he internet can bring knowledge and information, but also offensive sexuality and mindless violence into the home."[12]

When it comes to the information society, Saudi Arabia is a place of contradictions. While the Saudi government has been heavily spending on the ICT sector, it, along with China, is widely considered to have one of the most restrictive internet-access policies. Before granting public access to the internet in 1999, the Saudi government spent two years building a controlled infrastructure, so that all internet traffic would pass through government-controlled servers. With the huge expansion in public network and wireless access, government policy is changing to allow the development of new technologies while maintaining the same security and control of media use that is part of Saudi socio-political culture.

It has even gone as far as to impose severe restrictions on Saudi internet cafés. On 15 April 2009, the Ministry issued eight instructions to internet café owners, including installing secret cameras, preparing a registration of users and their identities (name of user, ID number and contact details), and a prohibition on using prepaid internet cards, as well as satellite dishes to access the internet without authorisation from the competent authorities.

One of its biggest drawbacks is its reliance on content filtering. The Saudi authorities justify the limitation on access to the World Wide Web from cultural, religious and national security perspectives. However, it is often claimed that control and censorship in Saudi Arabia is historical, and is motivated by socio-political reasons, as the government does not publish a list of offending sites.

In order to filter online content, all international web traffic must go through the main proxy server that is run by the national regulator (CICT), which keeps a log of this activity. Only internet service provider (ISP) proxies are allowed to connect to CICT's proxy. All ISPs offering web access to their customers must run their own caching proxy server. ISPs are not required to block any sites, since the CICT's proxy does that; but they are required to maintain a one-month log of their user activity. The log must include internet protocol (IP) addresses, user names, dates and times of activities, hypertext transfer protocol (HTTP) commands used and full URL or web addresses accessed. Foreign media that report extensively on Saudi Arabia are systematically censored, with articles and pictures blocked.

These censored sites are blocked when web pages are deemed either offensive to Islam, a threat to national security or contain what the state would label "inappropriate" images. Among web pages that are blocked are the following categories:

Theologically oriented sites that:
- Include any criticisms of Islam
- Advocate non-Islamic teachings
- Advocate religious tolerance.[13]

Health websites that:
- Contain health information on specific diseases, such as HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases (including treatment and prevention methods)
- Contain information on abortion and other aspects of women's health (especially if containing images)
- Contain information on illegal drugs (including the war on drugs, and the effects and risks of using illegal substances).

Entertainment websites that:
- Deal with certain "Western" music genres[14]
- Contain jokes deemed offensive
- Provide online movies for download (this reflects the censoring of the offline film industry).

All websites containing homosexual content including:
- Support for the homosexual community
- Social networking for the homosexual community.

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11 Saudi Arabia does not have a Freedom of Information Act, nor legislation guaranteeing freedom of expression.

12 Quotes from Barack Obama's historic speech in Cairo, 4 June 2009. www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-by-the-President-at-Cairo-University-6-04-09

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13 Some sites fall into this category (e.g., those that advocate the teachings of religions other than Islam). However, not all sites advocating religious tolerance are blocked.

14 Such as rock, pop and rap.

Political websites that contain:

- Perceived hostility towards Saudi Arabia (including the sites of organisations such as Amnesty International and the Saudi Arabian National Society for Human Rights, NSHR)[15]

- Political analysis of Saudi Arabia. Most recently this has included "naming and shaming" Saudi bloggers who analyse the socio-political scene (the number of Saudi blogs being filtered is rising dramatically).

Websites generally containing what is deemed inappropriate material:

- Any types of pornographic material (whether in literature or in image or video formats)

- Specific sites that grant access to inappropriate material (search engines such as Google Images and Altavista)

- Specific non-pornographic human images, which could range from lingerie to modelling (or any images of people who are wearing less clothing than what is deemed appropriate in public)

- Support or advocacy of euthanasia.

Educational websites that:

- Provide information on women's empowerment and feminism

- Grant access to specific sections in online encyclopaedias and search engines that contain content from the above categories

- Contain information on sexuality and relationships.

Tech-savvy websites that:

- Provide information and services that allow access to restricted sites (via proxies, archives or even translation sites that would allow access to other censored sites).

Terrorism-related sites that:

- Encourage extremism, spread hatred, and promote violence

- Advocate political intolerance

- Contain information on how to join and help religious fundamentalists

- Contain information on how to make explosives, or how to create havoc.

New trends

In the last few years, Saudi Arabia has witnessed unprecedented growth in demand for internet services, an increase attributed to population growth, economic expansion as well as increased investment in this sector. However, government censorship of information is likely to continue. Highlighted below are some of the top trends that are likely to emerge in the coming year:

- Growing use of Web 2.0 technologies. Web 2.0 technologies are serving as integrated hubs for individuals, organisations and their extended networks to connect, communicate, access and share tailored news, information and entertainment.

- An increase in the number of connections via satellite dishes to access the internet (although the use of this type of connection is prohibited).

- With an increase in the number of Saudi citizens studying abroad, Saudis are seeking and connecting to the internet via virtual private networks (VPNs).

- Increased trends towards blogging and micro-blogging (micro-blogging is becoming more popular as it is difficult for the authorities to block the many applications used).

- Continued growth in the use of web-enabled mobile devices.

- As the authorities are cracking down (naming and shaming bloggers), virtual identities are becoming more and more popular.

- As physical infrastructure remains an issue, more citizens are looking at mobile broadband. This trend is currently growing at a rate of 126% per quarter.

Action steps

The following action steps are needed to stimulate a free information society in Saudi Arabia:

- The government needs to introduce privacy and individual rights laws, including legislation on access to information and freedom of expression.

- The government censorship system needs to be reviewed. Not all content is filtered on religious or national security grounds.

- Transparency needs to be encouraged through the government publishing a list of all filtered websites, with reasons for their filtering.

- Access to scientific content on the internet must be provided to encourage research innovation. In general citizens need to be encouraged to use the internet as a knowledge tool rather than just for social networking or banking transactions.

- More governmental campaigns are required to build confidence and awareness about ICT security and privacy.

- Arabic content on the internet must be increased to encourage its use by larger segments of the population.

- More public internet access points are needed, and ISP infrastructure needs to be upgraded to improve broadband connectivity.

- The government needs to put pressure on ISPs to upgrade their infrastructure. Liberalising the market on its own will not substantially improve broadband connectivity. ∎

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15 At the time of writing, the NSHR website was accessible (after being blocked), as were the websites of some international human rights organisations like Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International. However, the Arab Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI.net) was blocked.

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH (GISWatch) 2009 is the third in a series of yearly reports critically covering the state of the information society *from the perspectives of civil society organisations across the world.*

GISWatch has three interrelated goals:

- **Surveying** the state of the field of information and communications technology (ICT) policy at the local and global levels

- **Encouraging** critical debate

- **Strengthening** networking and advocacy for a just, inclusive information society.

Each year the report focuses on a particular theme. **GISWatch 2009** focuses on *access to online information and knowledge – advancing human rights and democracy.* It includes several thematic reports dealing with key issues in the field, as well as an institutional overview and a reflection on indicators that track access to information and knowledge. There is also an innovative section on visual mapping of global rights and political crises.

In addition, 48 country reports analyse the status of access to online information and knowledge in countries as diverse as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mexico, Switzerland and Kazakhstan, while six regional overviews offer a bird's eye perspective on regional trends.

GISWatch is a joint initiative of the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) and the Humanist Institute for Cooperation with Developing Countries (Hivos).

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2009 Report
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