Soaring mobile broadband access has improved internet penetration rates in recent years, though there are still disparities in access based on age, education, and income level. New regulations issued during 2017 are expected to improve competition among fixed-line service providers by allowing rival operators to use infrastructure owned by the incumbent telecommunications firm.

**Obstacles to Access:**

- Authorities detained and sought criminal charges against several individuals for criticizing public officials, accusing them of corruption, or publishing other nonviolent political, social, or religious speech online (see Prosecutions and Detentions for Online Activities).

Legal restrictions on internet and digital media freedom are principally based on the Cybercrime Law and the Press and Publication Law (PPL). Under article 11 of the Cybercrime Law, online defamation may result in a fine and prison sentence of at least three months. The Law Interpretation Bureau ruled that the law could also be applied to journalists for articles that appeared on their outlets’ websites, thereby contravening journalistic freedom. The vague definition of the term “journalistic activity” is open to interpretation, and its application to online publications can result in the closure of websites and imprisonment of journalists.

Internet freedom improved in Jordan due to improved access, the effective use of digital activism, and a slight reduction in the number of blocked news sites in comparison to last year.

**Availability and Ease of Access**

- Ninety percent of all internet subscriptions are mobile broadband subscriptions, with the number of fixed-line ADSL subscriptions steadily decreasing.

According to Pew Research Center, there is a "real and pervasive" demographic divide among internet users in Jordan. While 75 percent of individuals from the ages of 18 to 34 use the internet, the percentage drops to 57 percent for those aged 35 and above. The contrast was even starker with respect to education levels. Ninety-six percent of people with "more education" used the internet, compared with only 41 percent of Jordanians with "less education." The report also shed light on economic differences, with 80 percent of high-income individuals using the internet, compared with 50 percent of low-income individuals.

**Restrictions on Connectivity**

Starting in June 2015, the government ordered ISPs to block access to messaging applications on days that secondary school students sat for their national exams (Tawjihi). In 2018, the number of blocked applications is expected to reduce.

**Key Developments:**

**June 1, 2017 - May 31, 2018**

- In May 2018, social media and messaging apps were instrumental in mobilizing thousands of protestors and securing public support against a draft income tax law (see Digital Activism).
- Ammon News claimed that hackers had gained access to their website and published two articles in November 2017 (see Technical Attacks).
- The government proposed amendments to the Cybercrime Law in September that would prohibit hate speech, raising concerns that the vaguely defined offenses could be used to punish legitimate expression (see Legal Environment).
- Authorities detained and sought criminal charges against several individuals for criticizing public officials, accusing them of corruption, or publishing other nonviolent political, social, or religious speech online (see Prosecutions and Detentions for Online Activities).

**Introduction:**

Internet freedom improved in Jordan due to improved access, the effective use of digital activism, and a slight reduction in the number of blocked news sites in comparison to last year.

During the coverage period, several activists were arrested for criticizing public officials or calling for reform. Authorities continue to block social media applications during school examinations, including WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, Twitter, and Instagram, with the number of apps increasing to eight in 2018. Internet service providers (ISPs) continue to block internet calling services (VoIP) on popular apps such as Viber, WhatsApp, and Skype, in apparent defiance of Jordan’s telecommunications regulator.

Legal restrictions on internet and digital media freedom are principally based on the Cybercrime Law and the Press and Publication Law (PPL). Under article 11 of the Cybercrime Law, online defamation may result in a fine and prison sentence of at least three months. The Law Interpretation Bureau ruled that the law could also be applied to journalists for articles that appeared on their outlets’ websites, thereby contravening journalistic freedom. The vague definition of the term “journalistic activity” is open to interpretation, and its application to online publications can result in the closure of websites and imprisonment of journalists.

Jordanians took to the streets in May 2018 in one of the country’s largest protests in recent years. More than 30 trade unions initiated a nationwide strike, and thousands of protestors followed suit in opposition to a draft law on income tax. The demonstrators relied extensively on social media and communication platforms to mobilize and, ultimately, to create effective change: the government resigned and the legislation was withdrawn.

**Obstacles to Access:**

- Soaring mobile broadband access has improved internet penetration rates in recent years, though there are still disparities in access based on age, education, and income level. New regulations issued during 2017 are expected to improve competition among fixed-line service providers by allowing rival operators to use infrastructure owned by the incumbent telecommunications firm.

**Availability and Ease of Access**

- Ninety percent of all internet subscriptions are mobile broadband subscriptions, with the number of fixed-line ADSL subscriptions steadily decreasing.

A survey conducted by the Department of Statistics demonstrated that women made up 47.2 percent of Jordanian internet users in 2016. It found that 8.5 percent of respondents cited the high cost of internet service as a reason for not using the internet, down from 13 percent in 2015, while 6.4 percent mentioned social issues and traditional values. Prices have dropped in recent years due to competition, in spite of the fact that the sales tax on internet services was increased from 6 to 16 percent in 2017.

The price for a monthly home broadband subscription ranges from JOD 16 (US$22) for a data allowance of 75 GB to JOD 26 (US$37) for an allowance of up to 1,000 GB. However, the main operators provide plans with reduced prices for governorates outside Amman, the capital. Monthly mobile internet prices range from JOD 3 (US$4.50) for a 500 MB plan to JOD 30 (US$43) for 2 GB.

According to Pew Research Center, there is a "real and pervasive" demographic divide among internet users in Jordan. While 75 percent of individuals from the ages of 18 to 34 use the internet, the percentage drops to 57 percent for those aged 35 and above. The contrast was even starker with respect to education levels. Ninety-six percent of people with "more education" used the internet, compared with only 41 percent of Jordanians with "less education." The report also shed light on economic differences, with 80 percent of high-income individuals using the internet, compared with 50 percent of low-income individuals.

**Restrictions on Connectivity**

Starting in June 2015, the government ordered ISPs to block access to messaging applications on days that secondary school students sat for their national exams (Tawjihi). In 2018, the number of blocked applications
reached seven, including WhatsApp, Messenger, Twitter, and Instagram. The restrictions are confined to locations near examination halls and limited to a couple of hours. Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) services are restricted by some ISPs. In March 2016, the TRC stopped Jordanian mobile operators’ attempts to impose fees on the use of VoIP services in order to increase profits. However, providers then blocked users from making free or cheap phone calls on services like WhatsApp and Viber, while Messenger, Telegram, and Skype remained accessible. In 2017, the Ministry of Information and Communications Technology (MoICT) proposed a new monthly fee of JOD 2 (USD 2.79) for users in order to unlock VoIP, with revenues shared between operators and the government. However, the proposed fee was rejected by the Council of Ministers.

The market power of the incumbent telecommunications operator, Orange Jordan, has been diluted in the last few years, as its de facto monopoly on the international gateway and local backbone has faced competitive terrestrial international connectivity and new fiber-optic backbones initiated by other operators. In addition, long-awaited regulations to enforce full local loop unbundling (LLU) were issued by the TRC in 2017, six years after the move was first announced, and these are expected to introduce more competition to the fixed-line sector by forcing Orange to open up its networks to other operators.

Orange remains the landing party for the FLAG PEA submarine cable, the only east-west cable to land in Jordan. However, a number of providers, like Damamax and LinkDotNet, have independent international connections. In May 2013, the incumbent provider, Vitt, signed an agreement to be the landing party for a possible connection of the FLAG PEC submarine cable to the port of Aqaba. International connectivity is also provided via terrestrial connections from neighboring countries as an alternative to submarine cables. In 2015, the RNC (Regional Cable Network) was launched to provide a high-capacity terrestrial fiber network from Fujainah in the United Arab Emirates to Amman, an addition to the established JAD (Jeddah-Amman-Damasus-Istanbul) link, in operation since 2010.

**ICT Market**

Three mobile service providers have a similar share of the market: Umniah (a subsidiary of Batelco Bahrain), Zain, and Orange Jordan. Orange Jordan is 53 percent owned by Orange SA of France, with the remaining shares divided between Jordan’s Social Security Corporation, the Jordan Telecommunications Company, and others. In 2018, the MoICT confirmed that the government had no intention to license a fourth mobile operator.

After rejecting two international operators, the government awarded Zain Jordan the rights to introduce 4G/Long Term Evolution (LTE) mobile services to the market, which it launched in 2014. In January 2015, Orange Jordan was awarded the second 4G license for USD 100 million and later that June, the third 4G license was granted to Umniah for an equivalent USD 80 million. In 2017, Friendi, Jordan’s only mobile virtual network operator and part of Virgin Mobile Middle East and Africa, suspended its operations due to losses.

**Regulatory Bodies**

The TRC is responsible for regulating the ICT sector. It is governed by the Telecommunications Law and defined as a “financially and administratively independent juridical personality.” Nonetheless, it is accountable to the MoICT, which was created in 2002 to drive the country’s ICT development. The TRC’s Board of Commissioners and its chairman are appointed upon nomination by the prime minister based on the recommendation of the ICT minister. The TRC is regulated under Law No. 13 of 1995 and its amendment, Law No. 8 of 2002. The legislation endorsed free-market policies and governs licensing and quality assurance.

**Limits on Content**

Authorities have increasingly used extralegal means to censor critical coverage in recent years. Licensed news sites have been blocked in fewer circumstances and without transparent legal authorization. Self-censorship remains pervasive, particularly regarding the royal family and Islam, although digital activism continued to expand over the past year.

**Blocking and Filtering**

Sporadic censorship continued during the coverage period. At least three websites were reportedly blocked.

In spite of the fact that it was initially blocked in 2016, the Media Commission in July 2017 revised an order to block access to local LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex) online magazine My.Kulli, after an Islamist member of parliament, Dima Tahhan, requested an inquiry into the site.

Also in July 2017, the online petitions website Numel.net was blocked for two weeks until the Media Commission made it accessible again. The website, according to its owners, was not a news site and was reportedly blocked in error by the commission.

In November 2017, the Media Commission announced that it had blocked a news website, whose name was not revealed, that is based outside Jordan and publishes Jordan-related content. Also blocked were an undisclosed number of news sites that had failed to obtain a license. The license had been notified and given a 90-day grace period.

In less transparent circumstances, the online magazine 7ber was inaccessible for 12 hours in July 2018, following the coverage period. In a short statement published on the magazine’s Twitter account, the editors publicly asked the government to determine the entity responsible for the block, as no order was apparently issued by the government.

Officially, the blocking of news websites is carried out according to the Press and Publications Law (PLL), amended in 2012, which stipulates that news websites need to obtain a license from the Media Commission or face blocking.

The law also requires any electronic publication that publishes domestic or international news, press releases, or comments to register with the Ministry of Commerce and Industry. One of the requirements for a general news website to obtain a license is to have an editor-in-chief who has been a member of the Jordan Press Association (JPA) for at least four years. In 2014, the JPA law was amended to enable journalists in online media to be admitted to the association. Prior to that, journalists could only become members if they had undergone a period of “training” in social media organizations.

According to the amended PLL, an electronic publication is defined as any website “with a specific web address on the Internet which provides publishing services, including news, reports, investigations, articles, and comments, and chooses to be listed in a special register maintained at the Department, pursuant to instructions issued by the Ministry for this purpose.” Articles 48 and 49 enable the head of the Media Commission (previously named the Press and Publications Department) to block any website for failing to obtain a license or, more broadly, for violating Jordanian law. The law’s expansive definition of a news website could be interpreted to include almost all Jordanian and international websites, blogs, portals, and social networks.

In June 2013, 290 websites were blocked on instructions from the head of the Media Commission after a nine-month grace period following the PLL’s 2012 amendment. Most have since applied for a license to get unblocked. In 2018, the number of licensed news websites reached 94.

To obtain licenses after 2012, most general news websites hired new editor-in-chief who were general news editors, a concern for independent media given that most JPA members worked in government or government-related media outlets.

**Content Removal**

The 2012 amendments to the PLL increased the liability of intermediaries for content posted on news websites, placing readers’ comments under the same restrictions as normal news content. Clause 3 of Article 49 states that the editors-in-chief of news websites are legally responsible for all content posted to their sites. Moreover, websites must keep a record of all comments for six months after initial publication and refrain from publishing any “untrue” or “irrelevant” comments.

As a result, some news websites, such as Al24x, stopped allowing comments for a limited period of time as an expression of protest.

**Media, Diversity, and Content Manipulation**

The overwhelming majority of journalists continue to practice self-censorship, as shown in the annual survey on media freedoms conducted by the Amman-based Center for Defending the Freedom of Journalists (CDFJ). The overwhelming majority of journalists continue to practice self-censorship, as shown in the annual survey on media freedoms conducted by the Amman-based Center for Defending the Freedom of Journalists (CDFJ). The overwhelming majority of journalists continue to practice self-censorship, as shown in the annual survey on media freedoms conducted by the Amman-based Center for Defending the Freedom of Journalists (CDFJ). The overwhelming majority of journalists continue to practice self-censorship, as shown in the annual survey on media freedoms conducted by the Amman-based Center for Defending the Freedom of Journalists (CDFJ).

According to the CDFJ survey, the percentage of respondents who believed that media professionals avoided discussing sex-related topics increased in 2017, reaching 8.4 percent, the highest level in eight years. Avoidance of religious issues decreased by 3 percentage points to 86.4 percent, the assassination of writer Nahed Hattar by a religious extremist and threats from such extremists against journalists were the main causes of the higher percentage in 2016, the survey noted.

The online information landscape continues to be limited by direct bans on reporting on certain topics, especially at critical moments. For instance, after the shooting of Hattar, the State Security Court banned all forms of publication regarding the case to “preserve the secrecy of the investigation in the public interest,” according to a circular from the Media Commission.

Starting in the second half of 2018, the government began blocking social media networks (including WhatsApp and Skype) in order to prevent users from transmitting political content. On September 21, the authorities announced that they would block access to Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube for 48 hours to prevent users from commenting on the royal family. The ban was lifted shortly afterward but imposed again on November 10.

Starting in the second half of 2018, the government began blocking social media networks (including WhatsApp and Skype) in order to prevent users from transmitting political content. On September 21, the authorities announced that they would block access to Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube for 48 hours to prevent users from commenting on the royal family. The ban was lifted shortly afterward but imposed again on November 10.

The government realized the importance of online communications and social networks during the protests. The prime minister’s office defended the draft tax law by posting some 12 informative videos and 14 infographics on Facebook and YouTube. Abdullah II launched a personal Twitter account.

Four state leaders and institutions have established social media channels to communicate with the public, including the Royal Hashemite Court, the Ministry of Women, the Prime Minister’s Office, and the Royal Court. For example, on Twitter, the Prime Minister’s Office is located and where the protests were concentrated.

**Digital Activism**

Digital activism was crucial during the coverage period, as Jordan experienced one of its largest protests in recent years. Starting on May 30, 2018, more than 30 trade unions initiated a nationwide strike and were later joined by students and Jordanians who opposed a draft law on income tax. The protests resulted in the resignation of the government and the withdrawal of the draft legislation. Social media and messaging apps were instrumental in mobilizing thousands of participants and securing support from a broad swath of the population. A Facebook event for the first general strike drew more than 25,000 attendees.

WhatsApp, Facebook, and other social media services were important information sources for Jordanians seeking to keep track of the demonstrations. According to a survey by the University of Jordan’s Centre for Strategic Studies (CSS), around 70 percent of Jordanians said they got their information regarding the protests through friends and social media, especially Facebook.

Many protesters utilized Facebook’s live-streaming feature to broadcast their protests, and short video reports on events received tens of thousands of views. Overwriting the coverage of traditional or official media outlets, particularly in the first few days,

Protest-related hashtags were trending throughout the course of the protests, including #JordanStrikes, #Manah ("We are broke!") and #AddinuaratRabe (a reference to the area in Amman where the prime minister’s office is located and where the protests were concentrated).

The government realized the importance of online communications and social networks during the protests. The prime minister’s office defended the draft tax law by posting some 12 informative videos and 14 infographics on Facebook with the heading “Fiscal Reform in Jordan.” The government’s spokesman announced on November 18 that the government originated in Syria, a claim that social media users generally dismissed with sarcasm. On the other hand, a video of the crowning prince, in which he confirmed the royal family’s support for peaceful protests during a visit to the demonstrations, went viral, receiving more than 350,000 views.

In a separate development, following years of efforts and campaigning by women’s and human rights activists, the parliament voted in August 2017 to repeal the controversial Article 308 of the penal code, which allowed...
Jordanians report using the internet to evade the restrictions on political speech.

Since mid-2010, cybercafés have been obliged to install security cameras to monitor customers, who must supply personal identification information before they use the internet. Café owners are required to retain the browsing histories of users for at least six months.

In accordance with Article 278 of the penal code, on “incitement to racism and sectarianism, and insulting religious feelings,” a case was filed against Jordanian cartoonist Emad Hajjaj in October 2017 at the request of a Catholic cleric, who objected to a cartoon posted on Twitter and Facebook that depicted Jesus on a cross denouncing the patriarch of the Greek Orthodox Church in Jerusalem.

In September 2017, the government proposed a series of new amendments to the Cybercrime Law to explicitly cover hate speech, defined as “any statement or act that would incite discord, religious, sectarian, ethnic or regional strife or discrimination between individuals or groups.” The changes could further constrain freedom of speech online, as the vague definition would allow authorities to prosecute reporters and social media users who address controversial issues. Although Prime Minister Al-Hashimi confirmed that his government was committed to freedom of expression after taking office in June 2016, he said the draft amendments would not be withdrawn and would be discussed in the parliament later in the year.

Many older laws continue to pose a threat to access to information and free expression online. These include the 1953 Court of Law, the 1960 penal code, the 1971 Protection of State Secrets and Classified Documents Law, the 1992 Defense Law, the Jordan Press Association Law, and the PPL.

Under Article 11 of the Cybercrime Law, journalists and social media users can be detained for publishing allegedly defamatory content online. In May 2017, anticorruption activist Husam al-Abdallat was arrested after a complaint was filed against him by two public officials whom he accused of corruption in a Facebook post. He was released on bail three weeks later.

Although fewer Jordanians were detained this year for “incitement to undermine the political regime” under Article 149 of the penal code, the practice continues. In July 2017, student activist Hesham Alayasra was detained for six days, before being released on bail, for a video he disseminated to his 800 followers on Snapchat in which he criticized the Jordanian government after a security guard killed two Jordanian nationals at the Israeli embassy in Amman.

Rakan Hyasat, an activist with the secular Jordanian Democratic Popular Unity Party, was detained for 15 days in September 2017 based on a complaint filed by Islamist lawmaker Dima Tahboub. After Tahboub condoned as a result of a defamation case filed by one of the individuals who appeared in the video.

In accordance with the Access to Information Law in Jordan, 2009, any person who wants access to government information must file a request in writing, paying a fee of 100 Jordanian dinars ($143). The government has 15 days to reply, and if it denies the request, it must explain its reasons.

Violations of User Rights:

Jordan’s laws do not explicitly permit surveillance of the internet, but there is no international agreement that permits the suppression of internet-related activity. The government does not block websites or conscript citizen journalists, but it does not investigate their activities. The government does not systematically block access to the websites of political opponents, social media platforms, or chat rooms.

There have been no reports about restrictions on virtual private networks (VPNs) and other circumvention tools, or about any limits on encryption. However, many Jordanians reportedly have a long-standing belief that the government monitors their online activities.

In November 2017, a short video of the arrest of Ashraf al-Refai, owner of the Al-Sabeel daily, Yaqoub Eid, were intimidated by security forces while covering a protest led by the family of one of those killed by a security officer at the Israeli embassy in Amman, Eid, who was live-streaming the event on Al-Sabeel’s Facebook page, had his mobile phone confiscated and its contents erased; Ghiyash was coerced by police officers into deleting a video she had recorded of the protest.

In 2016, journalist writer Naseh Hattar was shot dead outside a courthouse in Amman, where he was due to face trial for posting a satirical cartoon deemed offensive to Islam on his Facebook page. Thousands of Jordanians expressed their solidarity with Hattar’s family, demanding an end to hate speech and incitement to violence online.

Several cases of online incitement and threats against journalists were reported in the past year. For example, cartoonist Emad Hajjaj was the target of a hostile online campaign, in addition to a legal complaint (see Jordan Country Report | Freedom on the Net 2018 https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/jordan

Prosecutions and Detentions for Online Activists, after he published a cartoon on Facebook that was deemed offensive to both Christians and Muslims. He was forced to delete the image and publish an apology to placate the angry reactions on social media.

Farah Marqa, a reporter and writer from the London-based news website Reutloum, received threatening and harassing comments on Facebook as a result of her report covering the case of Jordanian soldier Maazik al-Tawaja, who was sentenced to life in prison by a military court in July 2017 for the deaths of three US soldiers at an airbase. Reporters Taher Badarin Al-Qahtani newspaper said he was attacked online after publishing a news article on Facebook page in October 2017, which was later removed by the author. The article covered a hunger strike by Islamist militants in Jordanian prisons. According to the reporter, police were able to identify the person behind one of the death threats he received, but he did not file a complaint.

Technical Attacks

Cybertattacks against bloggers and the staff of news websites have decreased in severity compared with previous years. However, recent geopolitical tensions have resulted in the hacking of news sites. In 2016, the state-owned news agency, Petra, confirmed that its website was affected by a cybertack. Hackers posted a fabricated news story regarding the deputy crown prince of Saudi Arabia. Officials claimed that Iranian hackers were behind the attack.

In 2017, Ammon News published two news stories that were later declared to be false after hackers were able to access the site. The first story announced a planned meeting between the chief of the royal court and Syrian president Bashar al-Assad, while the other was related to a phone call between the king and the Saudi crown prince. The same website was also hacked in 2016, after its editors refused to comply with security agents’ demands to remove a statement by 36 prominent Jordanian tribesmen who called for democratic and economic reforms.

In October 2017, the website of government-owned Jordan Post, the main provider of postal services in the country, was hacked by unknown persons who displayed a message criticizing the inappropriate treatment of Tawayha, who was sentenced to life in prison by a military court in July 2017 for the deaths of three US soldiers at an airbase.

In 2018, the government blocked Tawjihi classrooms’ access to three applications, the angry reactions on social media.

Notes:

30. Ibid.
35. “Jabber (jabber), “We are still waiting for a clarification from the government about who is responsible for the inaccessibility of the site for 12 hours, taking into account that any entity capable to block [sites] should belong to the government, at least constitutionally,” Tweet [in Arabic], July 3, 2018, http://bit.ly/2yqmmMR.
41. In a discussion about the impact of website licensing and the PPL, publisher of news website JQ24, Basil Okour said that they stopped allowing comments on their website in protest of the law and to protect the privacy of their readers, See “As Open Meeting at 7:06 to Discuss the State of Online Journalism After the Website Registration Requirement,” [in Arabic], YouTube video, 2:14:34, posted by Jordan Days, December 8, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MjUkvuRcBlI.
49. Facebook
requires Internet cafes to install surveillance cameras and keep Internet visits for months” [in Arabic],

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84 "A view of the situation of press freedom in Jordan,” Al Araby TV, January 18, 2018,

83 "Activist Husam-al Abdallat accused of defamation,” Al Jazeera, May 21, 2017


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78 "A view of the situation of press freedom in Jordan,” Al Araby TV, January 18, 2018,

77 Law number (32) 2012. Amendments to The Press and Publications law for the Year 1998 (8), Article 38, clauses A, B, C & D.

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64 "An announcement by Jafra News about the news of Minister of Finance Omar Malhas," Jafra News [in Arabic], May 31, 2018,


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