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Freedom Of The Press - Oman (2011)

Status: Not Free
Legal Environment: 25
Political Environment: 27
Economic Environment: 19
Total Score: 71

Oman's 1984 Press and Publications Law is one of the most restrictive statutes of its kind in the Arab world, and serves to create a highly censored and subdued media environment. Articles 29, 30, and 31 of the 1996 Basic Law guarantee freedom of expression and of the press; however, these rights are abridged in practice. Libel is treated as a criminal offense, and journalists can be fined or imprisoned for voicing criticisms of the sultan or for printing material that leads to "public discord, violates the security of the state, or abuses a person's dignity or rights." The Telecommunications Act allows the authorities to prosecute individuals for any message, sent through any means of communication, which violates public order and morals. Journalists are required to obtain licenses to practice, and since 2005, they have been obliged to reapply each year as an employee of a specific media outlet, thus forbidding the practice of freelance journalism. Journalists may have their licenses revoked at any time for violating press laws. The government also retains the right to close down any media outlet at any time.

The Ministry of Information may legally censor any material regarded as politically, culturally, or sexually offensive in both domestic and foreign media, and they have blacklisted several authors and specific books deemed controversial. During the Muscat International Book Fair in March 2010, the government banned the distribution of 11 books by Omani authors. Information and news are widely available, and foreign broadcasts are often accessed via satellite in urban areas. However, there is a basic lack of coverage of local topics such as the economy, unemployment, and minority and migrant issues. Reporters have been jailed in the past for coverage of colleagues' arrests, and self-censorship is widespread due to fears that critical news stories will result in prosecution.

In addition to the two major state-owned newspapers, the government owns four radio stations and two television stations. There are eight privately run newspapers currently operating in Oman. Private newspapers are able to sustain themselves largely on local and international advertising revenues rather than sales, and many no longer need to accept state subsidies. There is one privately owned satellite network, which refrains from broadcasting politically controversial content. Viewers have relatively unobstructed access to foreign broadcasts via satellite subscriptions.

About 63 percent of Oman's population used the internet in 2010. Although internet usage is on the rise, Oman's rate of internet penetration is still low compared to other Gulf countries. Attempts to extend internet service to areas outside the capital have had limited success, partly because of technical problems and high prices. Oman's internet and telecommunications sector had been monopolized by the

state-run Oman Telecommunications Company until 2008, when the government allowed a privately owned competitor, Nawras, to begin providing internet service. Despite the limited opening of the telecommunications sector, the government still exercises considerable control and censorship of the internet. The Internet Service Manual stipulates a lengthy list of prohibited content, including defamation of the ruling family and false data or rumors. The government routinely blocks websites deemed sexually offensive or politically controversial. In February 2010, Omantel blocked Community Queer, a website maintained by two gay Omanis, and in March, the blog Muscat Confidential—known for its critical commentary on local news—was temporarily blocked. Some bloggers have been able to use Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) to bypass censorship of internet service providers, but in August 2010, the Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (TRA) proposed a new law banning the use of VPNs. Under the proposed regulation, which had not yet been signed into law at year's end, internet users who violate the VPN ban would be fined 500 Omani rials (\$1,290). Despite restrictions on internet usage, in recent years the authorities have shown greater tolerance for limited criticism of the government, particularly on several online discussion forums, the most popular of which are Farrq al-Harah and Al-Sabla. Private communications such as mobile telephone calls, e-mail, and exchanges in internet chat rooms are monitored.