



# SAUDI ARABIA

	2012	2013
<b>INTERNET FREEDOM STATUS</b>	<b>NOT FREE</b>	<b>NOT FREE</b>
Obstacles to Access (0-25)	14	14
Limits on Content (0-35)	26	24
Violations of User Rights (0-40)	31	32
<b>Total (0-100)</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>70</b>

POPULATION: 28.7 million  
INTERNET PENETRATION 2012: 54 percent  
SOCIAL MEDIA/ICT APPS BLOCKED: Yes  
POLITICAL/SOCIAL CONTENT BLOCKED: Yes  
BLOGGERS/ICT USERS ARRESTED: Yes  
PRESS FREEDOM 2013 STATUS: Not Free

\* 0=most free, 100=least free

**KEY DEVELOPMENTS: MAY 2012 – APRIL 2013**

- The past year saw an increase in the use of Twitter and other social media to debate national issues and criticize government officials, contributing to the overall increase in activism and diversity of online content. Nonetheless, expressing negative views toward the royal family and Islam remained off limits (see **LIMITS ON CONTENT**).
- Harsh laws on libel and defamation have been consolidated through a series of government warnings directed at online speech (see **VIOLATIONS OF USER RIGHTS**).
- While the number of people arrested for their online activities has continued to grow, instances of physical attacks against users have decreased overall (see **VIOLATIONS OF USER RIGHTS**).

## INTRODUCTION

In the wake of popular uprisings throughout the Arab world, the government of Saudi Arabia held tightly to power through the enforcement of strict limits on free speech and organized protest. The vulnerability of the country's existing social order has been most visible in the Eastern Province (*Ash-Sharqiyah*), where a continued crackdown on protesters belonging to the underrepresented Shi'a minority has led to over a dozen deaths.<sup>1</sup> Facebook groups calling for the release of prisoners of conscience list the names of hundreds of detained activists, though detailed figures for those arrested are not available. While the Ministry of Interior (MOI) has ostensibly claimed that only 2,221 Saudis were being held in prison as of March 2013,<sup>2</sup> others estimate the number at around 30,000, including hundreds of prisoners of conscience listed on Facebook groups.<sup>3</sup> While the recent wave of demonstrations has not changed the political landscape of Saudi Arabia as it has in other countries of the region, a notable rise in online activism throughout 2012 and early 2013 suggests that an increasing—though still limited—number of Saudis are no longer afraid to challenge the status quo.

Having first gained access to the internet in 1998, Saudis now go online from their home, place of employment, data-enabled mobile phones, and internet cafes. All forms of internet and mobile phone access are available in the country, including fiber-optic networks (FTTx), third-generation (3G) and fourth-generation (4G) mobile networks, internet via satellite, and High-Speed Packet Access (HSPA) technologies. Similarly, while Saudi Arabia is a regional leader in providing e-government services, authorities have looked to exploit technology to more disturbing ends as well.<sup>4</sup> For instance, in line with restrictions to Saudi women's freedom of movement imposed in November 2012, a woman's male "guardian" is alerted by text message when she presents herself at the airport to ensure that she has gained permission to leave the country.<sup>5</sup> While the government is keen to use ICTs to enforce strict social norms and monitor its users, public figures and religious authorities continue to warn citizens against the "evils" of social media and other online tools. In March 2013, uproar over numerous defamation cases led the Grand Mufti to criticize Twitter as a "council of clowns" made up of users who "unleash unjust, incorrect and wrong tweets."<sup>6</sup>

Social media has come to play an increasingly crucial role in the country. Saudis have employed online tools to highlight corruption, discuss sensitive issues of national relevance, and demand the release of prisoners of conscience. However, as the use of Twitter has skyrocketed, so have

<sup>1</sup> "Questions over Death of Protester in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province," Al-Monitor, January 23 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/politics/2013/01/peaceful-protestor-killed-in-saudi-arabia.html>.

<sup>2</sup> "Ministry's appeal: Ignore rumors, maintain peace", Arab News Newspaper, March 8, 2013, <http://www.arabnews.com/saudi-arabia/ministry%E2%80%99s-appeal-ignore-rumors-maintain-peace>

<sup>3</sup> "Saudi Arabia show of force stifles 'day of rage' protests", BBC, December 27, 2012, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/newsnight/9422550.stm>.

<sup>4</sup> , United Nations, "United Nations E-Government Survey 2012," December 26, 2012, <http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/un/unpan048065.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> "Where's my wife? Electronic SMS tracker notifies Saudi husbands", AlArabiya, December 27, 2012, <http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/11/22/251255.html>.

<sup>6</sup> "Twitter is for clowns: Saudi Arabia's Grand Mufti", AlArabiya, March 23, 2013, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/2013/03/23/Twitter-is-a-council-of-clowns-Saudi-Arabia-s-Grand-Mufti-.html>

government efforts to monitor and in some cases detain users for tweeting about sensitive aspects of Islam or the Saudi monarchy. Although the government has spoken of the difficulties of monitoring Twitter,<sup>7</sup> in early 2013 it conducted an experiment in which it temporarily blocked millions of Twitter pages.<sup>8</sup> There is no doubt that these measures have been very effective in quelling any movements that could potentially challenge the monarchy's absolute grip on political power and the overriding social order.

## OBSTACLES TO ACCESS

Saudis have enjoyed a rapid growth of internet and communications technologies in recent years. Access had increased to 54.1 percent of the population, or 15.8 million users, by the end of 2012, up from 20 percent in 2006.<sup>9</sup> Fixed broadband use stands at 40.8 percent of all connections, while less than 20 percent of subscribers still use a slower dial-up service.<sup>10</sup> WiMAX, a prepaid technology that allows users to access broadband internet wirelessly from any location through a USB modem, is widely used in Saudi Arabia due to its affordability.

Similarly, standard mobile phone subscriptions have almost tripled since 2006, rising to 53.1 million subscriptions in use as of February 2013.<sup>11</sup> This represents a penetration rate of 181.6 percent<sup>12</sup> or an estimated average of 4.6 mobile lines per household.<sup>13</sup> Finally, 86 percent of mobile subscriptions are prepaid, while 42.1 percent are mobile broadband connections.<sup>14</sup>

Connection speeds for broadband users generally vary between 724 Kbps and 1.22 Mbps, depending on the service package. According to a recent survey, a majority of those questioned were not satisfied with their connection speeds or with prices.<sup>15</sup> Monthly expenditure on broadband service ranges from between SAR 42 (\$11) and SAR 334 (\$89),<sup>16</sup> representing a sharp drop from the 2003 price of SAR 700 (\$187) per month.<sup>17</sup> One Gigabyte (GB) of prepaid broadband starts at SAR 100 (\$26) per month, while an unlimited internet connection for three months costs SAR 333 (\$89).<sup>18</sup>

<sup>7</sup> "Govt monitoring of Twitter 'too difficult'", Arab News Newspaper, February 13, 2013, <http://bit.ly/VY61Je>.

<sup>8</sup> "Saudi Authorities performs an experiment to block millions of Twitter links" [in Arabic], Anhri.net, March 6, 2013, <http://www.anhri.net/?p=72079>.

<sup>9</sup> CITC, "ICT Indicators Report – 2012," <http://bit.ly/18zqBbV>.

<sup>10</sup> CITC, "ICT Indicators Report – 2012."

<sup>11</sup> CITC, "ICT Indicators Report – 2012."

<sup>12</sup> CITC, "ICT Indicators Report – 2012."

<sup>13</sup> "The State of ICT Market Development in Saudi Arabia," Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2010, CITC, December 23, 2012, <http://bit.ly/HPUZyN>.

<sup>14</sup> CITC, "ICT Indicators Report – 2012."

<sup>15</sup> CITC, "The State of ICT Market Development in Saudi Arabia." Those surveyed were predominantly male (95 percent) and between the ages of 20 and 39 (83 percent).

<sup>16</sup> CITC, "The State of ICT Market Development in Saudi Arabia."

<sup>17</sup> "User's Survey", Internet Services Unit (ISU), King Abdulaziz City for Science & Technology, 2006, <http://www.isu.net.sa/surveys-&-statistics/new-user-survey-results.htm>.

<sup>18</sup> Mobily, "Connect", <http://bit.ly/JkA07w>.

Overall, infrastructure is not considered a major barrier to access except in remote and sparsely populated areas. Internet penetration is highest in major cities such as Riyadh and Jeddah, as well as in the oil-rich Eastern Province. Residents of provinces such as Jizan in the south and Ha'il in the north are the least likely to use the internet, while young Saudis make up the majority of the user population throughout the country.<sup>19</sup> Arabic content is widely available, as are Arabic versions of applications such as chat rooms, discussion forums, and social media sites.

Saudi Arabia is connected to the internet through two country-level data services providers, the Integrated Telecom Company and Bayanat al-Oula for Network Services, up from a single gateway in years past. These servers, which contain long lists of blocked sites, are placed between the state-owned internet backbone and global servers. All user requests that arrive via Saudi internet service providers (ISPs) travel through these servers, where they can be filtered and possibly blocked. The authorities blocked the Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) application Viber three months after warning that VoIP and internet messaging services may be blocked if they do not meet regulatory standards (for more on internet censorship, see "Limits on Content").<sup>20</sup>

The two country-level service providers offer services 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 36 in 2011.<sup>21</sup> 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).

Internet cafes, once prevalent in the country, have become less popular in recent years due to the broad availability and affordability of home broadband access. With the departure of many power users, internet cafes are now mainly used by youth from lower socio-economic backgrounds to congregate and socialize. Due to a mandate<sup>22</sup> issued by the Ministry of Interior (MOI) on April 16, 2009,<sup>23</sup> all internet cafes must close by midnight, compliance of which is ensured by the police. These measures were ostensibly designed to crack down on internet use by extremists, but in practice they allow the police to deter any activity that the government may find objectionable. Conversely, coffee shops have grown in popularity among business people, young adults, and single males, who enjoy free Wi-Fi access with their paid beverages.

Previously, all internet governance fell under the purview of the Internet Services Unit (ISU), a department of the King Abdulaziz City for Science & Technology (KACST). Established in 1998 and reporting directly to the Vice President for Scientific Research Support of KACST, the ISU now only provides internet access to government departments, as well as Saudi research and

<sup>19</sup> CITC, "The State of ICT Market Development in Saudi Arabia."

<sup>20</sup> "CITC blocks Viber", Saudi Gazette, June 5, 2013,

<http://www.saudigazette.com.sa/index.cfm?method=home.regcon&contentid=20130605168659>

<sup>21</sup> CITC, "Annual Report, 2011" [in Arabic], Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2012,

[http://www.citc.gov.sa/arabic/MediaCenter/Annualreport/Documents/PR\\_REP\\_007.pdf](http://www.citc.gov.sa/arabic/MediaCenter/Annualreport/Documents/PR_REP_007.pdf).

<sup>22</sup> For more information on this mandate, please refer to [Arabic]

<http://www.okaz.com.sa/okaz/osf/20090416/Con20090416271112.htm>.

<sup>23</sup> "New hidden camera rule for Internet cafés", Saudi Gazette, April 16, 2009,

<http://www.saudigazette.com.sa/index.cfm?method=home.regcon&contentID=2009041635209>

academic institutions.<sup>24</sup> In 2003, the Communication and Information Technology Commission (CITC) became responsible for providing internet access to the private sector.

The CITC establishes policies and enforces the regulations on the country's information and communication technology (ICT) services, including duties such as managing tariffs, performing content filtering, and licensing providers.<sup>25</sup> Under the 2007 Anti-Cyber Crime Law, the CITC also assists the Ministry of Interior (MOI) in monitoring extremists and political activists.<sup>26</sup> While both the CITC and KACST claim to enjoy administrative and financial independence, there is no evidence to support this. On the contrary, the CITC chairman is also the Minister of Communications and Information Technology, while the KACST President reports directly to the Prime Minister and is appointed by the King. Board members consist of government officials, appointed to these roles on the basis of their position within the government.

## LIMITS ON CONTENT

The Saudi government continued to employ strict filtering over internet content throughout 2012 and early 2013. Sites that are judged to contain “harmful,” “illegal,” “anti-Islamic,” or “offensive” material are routinely blocked, including pages related to pornography, gambling, and drugs. While part of the government's blocking policy is designed to disrupt terrorist networks and the dissemination of extremist ideology, the government also blocks any content that it deems harmful to society or challenging to the royal family. Criticism of Saudi Arabia, the royal family, or other Gulf Arab States is not tolerated, in addition to sites that organize political opposition or question the ruling family's strict conception of Islam.<sup>27</sup> The extensive list of sites blocked under these policies is supplemented by an additional list formulated from recommendations of the public.<sup>28</sup> In early 2013, the government also temporarily blocked millions of Twitter pages in an experiment to test its capabilities.<sup>29</sup>

Websites and social media pages belonging to human rights or political organizations, such as the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Organization (ACPRA) and the Arab Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI), are blocked.<sup>30</sup> Sites belonging to several Saudi religious scholars and dissidents are blocked,<sup>31</sup> as well as those related to the Shi'a religious minority, such as

<sup>24</sup> “ISU History”, KACST, March 2, 2013, <http://www.kacst.edu.sa/en/depts/isu/Pages/about.aspx>

<sup>25</sup> “CITC Roles and Responsibilities”, CITC, March 2, 2013,

<http://www.citc.gov.sa/English/AboutUs/AreasOfwork/Pages/default.aspx>

<sup>26</sup> Anti-Cyber Crime Law, MOI [in Arabic], March 2, 2013, <http://bit.ly/19JUq7S>.

<sup>27</sup> “The censorship policy of websites that spread extremist ideologies has proven its success” [in Arabic], AlArabiya.Net, December 22, 2012, <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/05/29/217356.html>.

<sup>28</sup> “General Information on Filtering Service”, Internet.gov.sa, June 22, 2013 <http://www.internet.gov.sa/learn-the-web/guides/content-filtering-in-saudi-arabia>

<sup>29</sup> “Saudi Authorities performs an experiment to block millions of Twitter links” [in Arabic], Anhri.net, March 6, 2013, <http://www.anhri.net/?p=72079>.

<sup>30</sup> According to the Alkasir.com, which provides information on blocked websites, the URLs [acpra6.org](http://acpra6.org) and [anhri.net](http://anhri.net) are blocked in Saudi Arabia. See <https://alkasir.com/map>, accessed March 2, 2013.

<sup>31</sup> Blocked websites of Saudi religious scholars include: [www.almoslim.net](http://www.almoslim.net), [www.albrrak.net](http://www.albrrak.net), and [islamqa.info/ar](http://islamqa.info/ar). “Blocking some sites because they violate rules and spread bold ideas and theses” [in Arabic], AlArabiya.net, April 6, 2012, <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/04/06/205754.html>.

Rasid.com,<sup>32</sup> Yahosein.org, and Awamia.net.<sup>33</sup> Authorities also block the website of the Islamic Umma Party, the country's only underground (and illegal) political party, which has called for the royal family to step down in return for a safe exit.

The CITC also censors individual social media pages that demand political reforms or basic civil rights. These include the Facebook pages of Abdullah al-Hamid and Mohamed Saleh al-Bejadi, well-known Saudi human rights activists and co-founders of the ACPRA,<sup>34</sup> as well as the Twitter accounts of the Saudi journalist and blogger Hassan Almustafa,<sup>35</sup> Saudi human rights activist and blogger Nouf Abdulaziz,<sup>36</sup> Saudi journalist and political activist Muhana al-Hubail, and the head of the organization "Monitor of Human Rights in Saudi Arabia" Waleed Abo al-Khair.<sup>37</sup>

Authorities have also occasionally moved to block entire online products and services for breaching the country's strict laws. In September 2012, the government threatened to block all of YouTube if Google did not restrict access to the controversial "Innocence of Muslims" video containing an offensive depiction of the Prophet Mohamed. Google later blocked the video in Saudi Arabia.<sup>38</sup> The CITC also has an aggressive stance toward VoIP services that circumvent the country's regulatory environment and, by some indication, the surveillance apparatus. So far only Viber has been blocked, though authorities have threatened to institute further restrictions.<sup>39</sup> BlackBerry services were temporarily stopped on June 30, 2012 following glitches experienced by the BlackBerry maker Research in Motion, according to Saudi Telecom Company (STC). There was no evidence to suggest that the government was behind the short suspension.<sup>40</sup>

In 2011, legislation was passed requiring that the owners of online news sites obtain a license from the Ministry of Culture and Information.<sup>41</sup> While not all blogs and websites have complied with this legislation, those that did not register with the ministry risk the possibility of closure at any time. Numerous sites have been closed for copyright violations<sup>42</sup> or for featuring advertisements for drugs.<sup>43</sup> In addition, several political opposition websites such as Humanf.org, Saudihr.org, Hummum.net, and Alwaqa.com have ceased operations over the past year, presumably because of pressure from the MOI. Reacting to a court verdict, in December 2012 the Ministry of Culture and

<sup>32</sup> "A list of blocked sites from within Saudi Arabia" [in Arabic/English], Adala Center], December 22, 2012, <http://www.adalacenter.net/?act=sec&pg=39>.

<sup>33</sup> <https://alkasir.com/map> viewed March 2, 2013

<sup>34</sup> "A list of blocked sites from within Saudi Arabia" [in Arabic/English], Adala Center, ], December 22, 2012, <http://www.adalacenter.net/?act=sec&pg=39>.

<sup>35</sup> See <http://hasantalk.com>.

<sup>36</sup> See <http://nofah.com/wordpress/>.

<sup>37</sup> See <https://twitter.com/abualkhair>.

<sup>38</sup> "YouTube blocks 'Innocence of Muslims' in Saudi Arabia", AlArabiya.net, September 19, 2012, <http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/09/19/238987.html>.

<sup>39</sup> "CITC blocks Viber", Saudi Gazette, June 5, 2013, <http://www.saudigazette.com.sa/index.cfm?method=home.regcon&contentid=20130605168659>

<sup>40</sup> "STC: BlackBerry service stoppage problem solved and service to return progressively" [in Arabic], Al-Madina Newspaper, June 30, 2012, <http://www.al-madina.com/node/387238?liv>.

<sup>41</sup> "Internet Enemies, Saudi Arabia," Reporters Without Borders, 2012, <http://bit.ly/JrLeVj>.

<sup>42</sup> "CITC closed down Haraj site after advertising half kilo Hashish", [in Arabic], AlSharq Newspaper, March 30, 2013, <http://www.alsharq.net.sa/2013/03/30/783097>

<sup>43</sup> "Saudi Arabia closes 52 sites violated intellectual property copyrights" [in Arabic], Ameinfo.com, October 16, 2012, <http://www.ameinfo.com/ar-248952.html>



Information also closed down an online discussion forum, “the Global Club,” after a sports journalist who rooted for al-Nassr soccer team complained that forum members had been verbally abusing him and his family.<sup>44</sup>

There were several incidents in which pressure from social media users and online newspapers led to users deleting “controversial” tweets, disassociating themselves from their accounts, or even deleting their accounts. For instance, Twitter user Hesaah al-Sheikh disassociated herself from her account after public anger erupted over her tweet in which she equated listening to the singer Mohamed Abdo as listening to Allah.<sup>45</sup> Disassociating oneself from a Twitter account is common in Saudi Arabia, particularly when simply deleting a controversial tweet is not enough to calm public anger. Users who are deemed to have acted inappropriately often publicly declare that the account does not belong to them and that another user is using their name to impersonate them, a common occurrence in Saudi Arabia.<sup>46</sup>

Similarly, the government also responds to take-down notices from members of the public, who can use a web-based form to submit a complaint regarding undesirable material.<sup>47</sup> Sites can also be unblocked through a similar process.<sup>48</sup> Once an individual completes such a request, a team of CITC employees determines whether the request is justified. The manager of public relations at the CITC said the commission receives about 200 requests each day, though he would not comment on how often the CITC unblocks a site based on such an appeal.<sup>49</sup> In one example, the CITC unblocked the website “Mustamel” after the owners obeyed a request from the CITC to remove illegal advertisements.<sup>50</sup>

The government is somewhat transparent about what content it blocks. Users who attempt to access a banned site are redirected to a page displaying the message, “Access to the requested URL is not allowed!” Still, a full list of banned sites is not publicly available. The country’s two data service providers must block all sites banned by the CITC,<sup>51</sup> and failure to abide by these bans may result in a fine of up to SAR 5 million (\$1.33 million), according to Article 38 of the Telecommunication Act.<sup>52</sup> It should be noted, however, that many Saudi internet users have become savvy at using circumvention tools such as Hotspot Shield, which allows users to access a virtual private network (VPN) to bypass censorship.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>44</sup> “A Nasrawi journalist won his case against an online discussion forum” [in Arabic], Sabq.org, December 27, 2012, <http://sabq.org/a7ifde>.

<sup>45</sup> “Writer Hessa Al-Sheikh explains to ‘Sabq’: Twitter account impersonated my personality” [in Arabic], Sabq.org, December 26, 2012, <http://sabq.org/Uuhfde>.

<sup>46</sup> “Saudi Minister of Culture and Information criticizes impersonation of intellectuals” [in Arabic], AlArabiya.net, March 2, 2013, <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/11/20/250707.html>

<sup>47</sup> The CITC block-request form is available at <http://bit.ly/aRBpYa>.

<sup>48</sup> The CITC unblock request form is available at <http://www.internet.gov.sa/resources/block-unblock-request/unblock/>.

<sup>49</sup> “About 300,000 requests to block sites in Saudi Arabia annually” [in Arabic], Ajl.com.sa, January 13, 2010, <http://www.burnews.com/news-action-show-id-12100.htm>.

<sup>50</sup> “For the second time Haraj site blocked in Saudi Arabia” [in Arabic], Qbas, March 26, 2013, <http://qbas.org/home/news.php?action=show&id=3585>

<sup>51</sup> CITC, “General Information on Filtering Service,” September 30, 2010, <http://bit.ly/yhOPwD>.

<sup>52</sup> Telecommunication Act found here [in Arabic]: <http://bit.ly/16Jzj5>.

<sup>53</sup> Saudis refer to this circumvention tool as a “proxy breaker.”

In addition to government censorship, self-censorship by online journalists, commentators, and social media users is widespread. For example, the owner of the popular “3al6ayer” YouTube channel admitted that he avoids crossing certain “red-lines” over fears of “getting into trouble with the authorities.”<sup>54</sup> Online commentators who express support for extremism, liberal ideals, minority rights, or political reforms, in addition to those who expose human rights violations, are closely monitored and often targeted by the government. Questioning religious doctrine is strictly taboo, particularly content related to the Prophet Mohamed.

These limitations are compounded by the self-censorship that online news moderators and site owners must exercise. Gatekeepers frequently delete user-generated content that could be deemed inappropriate or inconsistent with the norms of society, as they can be held legally liable for content posted on their platforms.<sup>55</sup> In one case that highlights the degree to which moderators pre-censor, user comments on the news site Sabq.org were full of praise for the poem “al-Haboob,” written by Prince Khalid al-Faisal, even though it was clear from Twitter that the majority of Saudis were making fun of him.<sup>56</sup>

The recent amount of controversial tweets that have been reported may reflect a decrease in Saudis’ willingness to censor themselves over Twitter. Indeed, many readily take to social networks to criticize problems in the country or government ministers so long as no references are made to the king or to religion. Users often employ hashtags to inspire a national debate on a certain political issue, including the tags “Breaking the fences”<sup>57</sup> and “elected Consultative Council” to expose corruption by public officials or call for reforms.<sup>58</sup> Prominent religious scholars, such as al-Awdah, have even contributed to these debates on Twitter.<sup>59</sup>

With so much activity occurring on social networks, the Saudi government maintains an active presence online as a means of manufacturing consent for its policies. It is believed the government employs an “electronic army” to constantly post progovernment views, particularly on social media. Progovernment trolls have taken to “hashtag poisoning,” a method of spamming a popular hashtag in order to disrupt criticism or other unwanted conversations through a flood of unrelated or opposing tweets. Through the use of a “bot,” such as those provided by Yoono.com, one individual can send thousands of tweets to a hashtag at the same time.<sup>60</sup> While the tweet may contain the same message, the bot sends the tweet on behalf of numerous fabricated accounts, created by combining random photos of faces with names searched from the internet. The

<sup>54</sup> “Idaat with Turki Al Dakheel” [in Arabic], AlArabiya.net, May 18, 2012, <http://bit.ly/LdV6EO>.

<sup>55</sup> “Raif Badawi’s wife provides “Anhaa” with the list of charges against her husband and calls for his release [in Arabic], Anhaa, April 25, 2013, <http://www.an7a.com/102662>.

<sup>56</sup> ““Al-Haboob” by Khalid Al-Faisal received high praise and harsh criticism on Twitter” [in Arabic], Sabq.org, January 1, 2013, <http://sabq.org/IWtfde>.

<sup>57</sup> الشبوك تحطيم#

<sup>58</sup> مجلس شوري منتخب#

<sup>59</sup> “Salman Al-Awdah calls for an elected Consultative Council in Saudi Arabia [in Arabic], Watan.com, December 29, 2012, <http://www.watan.com/news/world-news/2012-12-29/18048>.

<sup>60</sup> “Fake accounts and drowning the hashtag in Twitter [in Arabic], Osama Al Muhaya, March 16, 2013, <http://osamh.me/blog/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/twitterstudy.pdf>



government also influences online news reporting by offering financial support to news sites such as Sabq.org and Elaph.com in return for coordination between site editors and the authorities.<sup>61</sup>

Whereas the authorities provide monetary support to progovernment websites, the owners of opposition websites can come under strong financial pressures as a result of the country's environment of censorship. Revenue from third-party advertisers can be heavily impacted by a government decision to block a website. The government can also request advertisers to cancel their ads on a particular website in order to pressure the website to close. Restrictions on foreign funding further inhibit the sustainability of websites that are critical to the ruling system.

Whereas opposition blogs and online forums were once the main instrument for discussing political and social matters, most Saudis now use social media to share information and express opinions. According to Abdul Rahman Tarabzouni, the Head of Emerging Arabia at Google, Saudis collectively watch 190 million YouTube videos per day, the highest amount of views per capita of any country in the world.<sup>62</sup> There are now dozens of comedic channels on YouTube, the most popular being "Eysh Elly," "La Yekthar," and "3al6ayer," which respectively have around 126 million, 51 million, and 39 million total views.<sup>63</sup> One reason for the success of these videos is their engagement in cautious rather than harsh criticism and their restraint against pushing the limits too far.

Similarly, Twitter continued to grow as a platform for expressing sensitive issues. Indeed, when interviewed, one Saudi described the country's Twitter environment as a sort of virtual parliament "where people from all political sides meet and speak freely."<sup>64</sup> Saudis are the largest adopters of Twitter in the Arab world, with the number of users reaching 2.9 million, or slightly over 10 percent of the population, as of October 2012.<sup>65</sup> Facebook is the third most visited site in the country<sup>66</sup> with 5.9 million local users, or 23 percent of the population.<sup>67</sup> A myriad of Facebook groups have been recently active in organizing low-level demonstrations in cities throughout the country.<sup>68</sup> The banned Islamic Umma Party also uses its official website to call for sit-ins and protests. While disparate protests do occur, these demonstrations generally have low attendance and do not lead to substantial political or social changes.

61 "Othman Al-Omair in Turning Point 8-5" [in Arabic] MBC (YouTube), December 24, 2012,

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player\\_embedded&v=r9oqwtWiSYA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=r9oqwtWiSYA).

62 "The emergence of Google", Arab News Newspaper, November 27, 2012, <http://www.arabnews.com/emergence-google>.

63 Other popular channels include 'Quarter to Nine,' 'Sa7i,' 'Masameer,' 'Eysh Elly,' 'Fe2aFala,' 'Hajma Mortadda' 'Just For Wanasah,' and 'Eysh Sar Fi Twitter.' "Twitter usage in KSA grows '10 times' the world average," *Saudi Gazette*, January 6, 2013, <http://www.saudigazette.com.sa/index.cfm?method=home.regcon&contentid=20130106148256>.

64 "Twitter Gives Saudi Arabia a Revolution of Its Own," Robert F. Worth, *The New York Times*, October 20, 2012, <http://nyti.ms/ORCPoc>.

65 "Saudis Cross Social Boundaries on Twitter", *New York Times*, October 20, 2012, <http://nyti.ms/S3hBS7>.

66 "Twitter usage in KSA grows '10 times' the world average," *Saudi Gazette*, January 6, 2013, <http://www.saudigazette.com.sa/index.cfm?method=home.regcon&contentid=20130106148256>.

67 "Facebook Statistics by country," Socialbakers, December 23, 2012, <http://bit.ly/fyo6ld>.

68 These include 'Islamic Umma Party', 'Kulna Hasim' (which is associated with 'Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association'), "Rajab Revolution 1432 in Holly Mosques Land", "Day of Anger in Saudi Arabia", "the coalition of free youth", "The national campaign for supporting detainees in Saudi Arabia", and "The Coordinating Committee for the Youth movement in Saudi Arabia".

However, more recently, the robustness of security forces in dismantling demonstrations has forced many Saudis to devise more creative forms of organized protest. Facebook is commonly used to specify the date, time, and place a protest or sit-in will take place, while YouTube has been instrumental in documenting the demonstrations and attracting media attention.<sup>69</sup> Videos documented a protest on June 6, 2012, in which a group of detainees' families carried out a demonstration inside a shopping mall after initially pretending to be regular customers.<sup>70</sup> Later that summer, demonstrators "marched" together in their cars on a highway.<sup>71</sup> In March 2013, 182 family members, including 15 women and 6 children, participated in a 12-hour sit-in in the central city of Buraidah. Police arrested 161 of the protestors<sup>72</sup> and blamed social media for stirring up the protests (for more on the arrests of users, see "Violations of User Rights").<sup>73</sup>

In addition to documenting protests, users secretly film officials engaging in inappropriate behavior at work. Footage is uploaded to YouTube and then disseminated via Twitter. In a recent case from December 2012, Abdullah al-Sheri (@Abdula73), a Saudi doctoral student in the United States, tweeted out the names of dozens of high-profile Saudi citizens who had obtained fake post-graduate university degrees. By matching information in the public domain against a Ministry of Higher Education list of universities that offer fictitious qualifications, al-Sheri was able to back up his claims with evidence.<sup>74</sup> His tweets caused a huge uproar, attracting media attention and putting pressure on the Consultative Council (*Majlis al-Shura*) to enact laws that would deter businesses from dealing with fictitious universities and punish those who obtained fake degrees.<sup>75</sup> Significantly, no complaint has been lodged against al-Sheri for his actions thus far.

Similarly, the anonymous Twitter user "@Mujtahidd" continues to criticize high profile members of the royal family<sup>76</sup> and to provide detailed descriptions of state corruption.<sup>77</sup> The popularity of the account has more than doubled over a short period, increasing from around 410,000 Twitter followers in June 2012 to over 960,000 as of March 2013.<sup>78</sup> More recently in 2013, he shared the tweets of dozens of users who defended the government using the exact same wording, thus evidencing the presence of an MOI Twitter army.<sup>79</sup> Due to his insider knowledge, the person(s) behind the Mujtahidd account is believed to be a disgruntled member of the Saudi royal family.

<sup>69</sup> "Ministry's appeal: Ignore rumors, maintain peace", Arab News Newspaper, March 8, 2013, <http://bit.ly/1eQ61Z0>.

<sup>70</sup> "Saudi activists stage rare protest march in Riyadh", USA Today, June 7, 2012, <http://usat.ly/16TutAS>.

<sup>71</sup> e3teqal YouTube Channel (<http://www.youtube.com/user/e3teqal/videos>), August 1, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VKFOMPbiRxY>

<sup>72</sup> "161 arrested in Buraidah", Arab News Newspaper, March 2, 2013, <http://bit.ly/1azlEz2>.

<sup>73</sup> Angus McDowall, "Saudi accuses activists of lying to stir protests," Reuters, March 7, 2013, <http://reut.rs/Z39vMW>.

<sup>74</sup> "The fictitious qualifications scandal" [in Arabic], Alriyadh Newspaper, November 30, 2012, <http://bit.ly/UfQyUS>.

<sup>75</sup> "Defaming 'fake degrees' holders puts pressure on Al-Shura to implement more deterrent laws" [in Arabic], AlSharq Newspaper, December 27, 2012, <http://www.alsharq.net.sa/2012/12/22/637690>.

<sup>76</sup> "Twitter Gives Saudi Arabia a Revolution of Its Own", York Times, December 27, 2012, <http://nyti.ms/RmDtYD>.

<sup>77</sup> "Mujtahidd," Twitter, accessed on February 12, 2013. <http://bit.ly/Mtgl50>.

<sup>78</sup> " 'Mujtahidd' exposes secrets of Saudi royal family on Twitter," LBC International, June 24, 2012,

<http://www.lbcgroup.tv/news/37984/mujtahidd-exposes-secrets-of-saudi-royal-family-on>

<sup>79</sup> <https://twitter.com/assaflovhotmail/status/307325546847694848/photo/1>.

## VIOLATIONS OF USER RIGHTS

The legal environment surrounding online expression remains a significant impediment to internet freedom in Saudi Arabia. While there have been no reported instances of users being physically attacked for online posts over the past year, authorities have become more proactive in prosecuting citizens using the country's restrictive laws. The MOI has introduced a new method for users to report offensive comments made toward them by other users, opening the door for an upsurge in defamation lawsuits that may ultimately have repercussions for freedom of expression. Overall, the MOI continues to enjoy relative impunity over its abuses of online users. Some have reported that authorities have confiscated their cars, computers, and other personal items indefinitely. Online commentators are often detained without specific charges and denied the right to an attorney. New registration requirements have also harmed the safety of using ICT tools anonymously and free from government interference.

The Basic Law of Saudi Arabia contains language that calls for freedom of speech and freedom of the press, but only within certain boundaries. The 2000 Law of Print and Press also addresses freedom of expression issues, though it largely consists of restrictions rather than protections. Online journalists employed at newspapers and other formal news outlets maintain the same rights and protections as print and broadcast journalists, and like their counterparts, are also subject to close government supervision. Similarly, laws designed to protect users from cybercrimes also contain clauses that limit freedom of expression. The 2007 Anti-Cyber Crime Law assigns jail sentences and fines for defamation; the unauthorized interception of private e-mail messages; the hacking of a website to deface, destroy, modify, or deny access to it; or simply the publishing or accessing of data that is "contrary to the state or its system."<sup>80</sup>

In late 2012, after an upsurge in defamation cases stemming from Twitter and the popular messaging service WhatsApp, the CITC deployed a large-scale media campaign to remind Saudis that "anyone who re-sends messages (via mobile phones and smart phone applications) that violate the sanctity of the private lives of citizens through insult, mockery, and violation of the sanctity of public morals, religious values and public order, will be sentenced to five years in jail, in addition to a fine of SAR 3 million (\$800,000)."<sup>81</sup> On August 8, 2012, the MOI also introduced a new web-based form on its official website allowing internet users to complain about offensive comments made online about them.<sup>82</sup>

Many online commentators have been imprisoned for publicly defaming other citizens. For example, a 25-year-old man was sentenced to four months and fined SAR 10,000 (\$2,666) by a court in the Eastern city of al-Qatif for publicly vilifying and defaming another man on Twitter after

<sup>80</sup> <http://bit.ly/VWXEmI>.

<sup>81</sup> "Privacy violators on Web face tough punishments", Arab News Newspaper, December 27, 2012, <http://www.arabnews.com/privacy-violators-web-face-tough-punishments>.

<sup>82</sup> "'Interior' confronts social networking sites abuse.. electronically", [in Arabic], Aleqtisadiah Newspaper, March 9, 2013, [http://www.aleqt.com/2012/08/08/article\\_681378.html](http://www.aleqt.com/2012/08/08/article_681378.html)

a dispute erupted between the two.<sup>83</sup> Significantly, laws regarding libel and defamation are not equally applied when it comes to the country's Shi'a minority. For example, after a prominent Saudi lawyer insulted Shi'as on Twitter by claiming that they are the "children of adultery and of unknown descents," authorities did not act to arrest him. Over ten thousand citizens in the Eastern province had signed a petition to call for a lawsuit against him.<sup>84</sup>

Twitter users who expose the misdeeds of government officials or public sector employees are often targeted by authorities. While there were no charges issued against al-Sheri for exposing the fake university qualifications of government officials (see "Limits on Content," above), authorities arrested an undisclosed Twitter user in late 2012 for frequently criticizing known public figures.<sup>85</sup> While the government stated that the user is a former public official, Twitter users believed that the user in question was @Saryat\_Aljibal and discussed the user's arrest using a Twitter hashtag. The account—well-known for frequently criticizing the President of the Royal Court—disappeared from followers' lists around the same time as the news of the arrest.<sup>86</sup>

In September 2012, Bader Thawab (@Bader Thawab) was arrested after tweeting "down with the House of Saud." He was put on trial in early 2013 for using social media to disturb "national unity," among other charges.<sup>87</sup> Prominent writer Turki al-Hamad was also arrested in December 2012 after tweeting "...we need someone to rectify [the Prophet] Mohamed bin Abdullah's doctrine."<sup>88</sup> Any discussion that questions an aspect of how Islam is practiced in society commonly leads to arrest. The incident inspired its own hashtag on Twitter and drew large amounts of both support and criticism. After five months in detention, al-Hamad was finally released on June 5, 2013.<sup>89</sup>

Following the latest wave of low-level demonstrations in the country, the number of online political activists that have been arrested has increased significantly. On March 9, 2013, a court in Riyadh disbanded the human rights organization ACPRA and sentenced two of its members, Abdulah al-Hamid and Mohammed al-Qahtani, to 11 years and 10 years of jail time respectively, in addition to a travel ban equal in length to their jail sentences.<sup>90</sup> Five years of their sentences were based on Article 6 of the Anti-Cyber Crime Law, relating to the creation of a website that could disturb social order.<sup>91</sup> Five founding members of ACPRA are also currently in detention.<sup>92</sup> Two founding members of the Islamic Umma Party', al-Wahiby and al-Gamidi,<sup>93</sup> have been in prison

<sup>83</sup> "Jailing a Saudi youth and fining him SAR 10000 because of 'Twitter'" [in Arabic], Alarabiya.net, December 27, 2012, <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/09/16/238303.html>.

<sup>84</sup> "Bin Zahim Recedes and Shiites Refuse to Step Down", Saudi Shia, April 24, 2012, <http://saudishia.com/index.php?act=artc&id=281&hl=sultan>

<sup>85</sup> "Riyadh Security (authorities) toppled a Twitter user from those threaten public order" [in Arabic], Sabq.org, December 27, 2012, <http://sabq.org/2iqfde>.

<sup>86</sup> <http://bit.ly/1azm6NT>.

<sup>87</sup> "Saudi Charged for 'Down with the House of Saud' Tweet", GlobalVoices, February 16, 2013, <http://bit.ly/Xfj7UE>.

<sup>88</sup> "As ordered by the Minister of Interior. Turki Al-Hamad arrested because of his "offensive tweets" against doctrine" [in Arabic], Sabq.org, December 24, 2012, <http://sabq.org/Ygtfde>.

<sup>89</sup> "Turki Al-Hamad released after 5 months from his dentition" [in Arabic], Sabq.org, June 5, 2013, <http://sabq.org/O65fde>.

<sup>90</sup> "10 years jail for Al-Qahtani and 11 for Al-Hamid in the ACPRA case" [in Arabic], Sabq.org, March 9, 2013, <http://sabq.org/onvfde>.

<sup>91</sup> Anti-Cyber Crime Law, MOI [in Arabic], March 2, 2013, <http://bit.ly/19JUq7S>.

<sup>92</sup> Those members are Suliaman Al-Rushoody, Mansour Al-Awth, Mousa Al-Garni, Mohamed Al-Bijadi and Saleh Al-Ashwan.

<sup>93</sup> Islamic Umma Party page on Twitter, [in Arabic], December 22, 2012, <http://twitter.com/islamicommapart>.

since February 2011.<sup>94</sup> Both the ACPRA and the Islamic Umma Party base many of their operations online.

In the most high-profile cases from the past, Hamza Kashgari and Raif Badawi continue to be held on charges related to their online activities. Kashgari, a young Saudi writer, published three tweets detailing an imaginary conversation with the Prophet Mohammed on February 4, 2012, causing tens of thousands of Twitter and Facebook users to call for his execution. King Abdullah reportedly ordered his arrest on charges of “disrespecting Allah” and “insulting the Prophet.”<sup>95</sup> After fleeing the country, he was immediately extradited from Malaysia despite pressure from international human rights groups.<sup>96</sup> The decision was heavily shrouded in controversy, as Malaysian authorities denied him access to his lawyers and refused requests from the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) to interview him.<sup>97</sup>

In the case of Raif Badawi, authorities have targeted the “Free Saudi Liberals” website co-founder repeatedly since March 2008, when he established the forum for discussing political and religious topics. He was arrested on June 17, 2012 and initially faced up to five years in prison and a hefty fine for “insulting Islam through electronic channels” and “going beyond the realm of obedience.” However, in December 2012 a court elevated the charge to apostasy, which is punishable by death.<sup>98</sup> While the apostasy charge has since been dropped, Badawi is still in prison facing other charges.<sup>99</sup>

As previously mentioned, the Ministry of Culture and Information requires that all blogs, forums, chat rooms, and other sites obtain a license from the Ministry to operate online, thus putting more pressure on online writers to self-regulate their content.<sup>100</sup> While the law has not yet been widely enforced, it is a serious threat to anonymity online. Users are also legally required to use their real names and register with the government when purchasing mobile phones. In 2012, the CITC introduced a new law making it mandatory to enter a user’s ID number to recharge a prepaid mobile card, rendering it virtually impossible to use prepaid mobile phones anonymously.<sup>101</sup> Nevertheless, a black market has since emerged in which vendors sell new SIM cards and prepaid refill cards with pre-existing ID numbers.<sup>102</sup> To stop this lucrative practice, the government is now considering linking these cards to fingerprints.<sup>103</sup>

<sup>94</sup> Islamic Umma Party official webpage, [in Arabic], March 10, 2012, <http://www.islamicommaparty.com/Portals/default/>

<sup>95</sup> Tehmina Kazi, “Those who threatened ‘Twitter blasphemy’ writer Hamza Kashgari should stop and remember what Islam is for,” *The Guardian*, 17 February 2012, <http://bit.ly/zsZOyo>.

<sup>96</sup> “Malaysia deports Saudi in Twitter posts row,” Al-Jazeera English, 13 February 2012, <http://aje.me/wCHThO>.

<sup>97</sup> “Saudi Arabia: Writer Faces Apostasy Trial,” Human Rights Watch, 13 February 2012, <http://bit.ly/xZmdHx>.

<sup>98</sup> “Saudi Arabia: Website Editor Facing Death Penalty,” Human Rights Watch, December 27, 2012, <http://www.hrw.org/news/2012/12/22/saudi-arabia-website-editor-facing-death-penalty>, and “Saudi Arabia: Free Editor Held Under Cybercrime Law,” Human Rights Watch, July 17, 2012, <http://bit.ly/Pb4Oxy>.

<sup>99</sup> “Apostasy Case against Saudi Activist Dismissed,” GlobalVoices, January 23, 2013, <http://bit.ly/149EutE>.

<sup>100</sup> “Internet Enemies, Saudi Arabia,” Reporters Without Borders, 2012, <http://bit.ly/JrLevJ>.

<sup>101</sup> “User’s ID number now required to recharge prepaid mobile phones”, Arab News, July 4, 2012, <http://bit.ly/1azmvzS>.

<sup>102</sup> “Black market for SIM cards with ID thriving”, Saudi Gazette Newspaper, December 31, 2012,

<http://www.saudigazette.com.sa/index.cfm?method=home.regcon&contentid=20121231147657>

<sup>103</sup> “Study to link SIM cards with fingerprints”, Arab News Newspaper, June 20, 2013, <http://www.arabnews.com/news/455594>.

Even anonymous users and writers who employ pseudonyms when making controversial remarks face special scrutiny from the authorities, who attempt to identify and detain them. Surveillance is rampant in Saudi Arabia; anyone who uses communication technology is subject to government monitoring, which is officially justified under the pretense of protecting national security and maintaining social order. The authorities regularly monitor websites, blogs, chat rooms, social media sites, e-mails, mobile phone text messages, and messages sent through the very popular service WhatsApp. Evidencing the government's determination to monitor its citizens, the American security expert Moxie Marlinspike published e-mail correspondence with an employee at Mobily who sought to recruit him to help the telecommunications firm with intercepting encrypted data from mobile applications such as Twitter, Viber, Vine, and WhatsApp.<sup>104</sup>

In addition to direct government monitoring, access providers are required to monitor their own customers and supply the authorities with information about their online activities, often without legal process. Since 2009, the MOI has made it mandatory for internet cafes to install hidden cameras and provide identity records of their customers. The security regulations also bar entrance to anyone under the age of 18.

As ICT use has grown across the country, the threat of cyberattacks has also escalated. Several websites and portals were subject to attacks in 2012 and early 2013, including Saudi Aramco, the world's largest oil company,<sup>105</sup> and the official website of the Directorate General of the Ministry of Education in Riyadh.<sup>106</sup> Smart phones and tablets are banned at security organizations out of fears of being targeted by hackers.<sup>107</sup> As part of a protest for the release of political detainees, a group of hackers also attacked the websites of the Ministry of Petroleum and Mineral Resources and the Saudi television station "Channel One."<sup>108</sup>

The hijacking of Facebook and Twitter accounts or impersonating public figures on Facebook and Twitter also remained widespread. The Saudi Human Rights Organization site was hacked on December 31, 2012<sup>109</sup> and, four days later, the Twitter account of the Saudi television show Al Raeis came under attack.<sup>110</sup> Al-Raeis, which appears on the channel "Line Sport", was apparently targeted for allowing harsh criticisms of prominent Saudi government officials and departments to be aired.

<sup>104</sup> "A Saudi Arabia Telecom's Surveillance Pitch", Moxie Marlinspike, May 13, 2013, <http://bit.ly/101Ynw>.

<sup>105</sup> "Saudi Aramco hit by computer virus", The Guardian, August 16, 2012, <http://bit.ly/St7x3l>.

<sup>106</sup> "A hacker mocks the weak security of the website of Riyadh Education Directorate" [in Arabic], AlArabiya.net, November 4, 2012, <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/11/04/247500.html>.

<sup>107</sup> "Saudi Arabia bans iPhones and Galaxy 'tablets' at security organizations," Al-Arabiya, July 15, 2011, <http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/07/15/157742.html>.

<sup>108</sup> "Websites belonging to Saudi Regime hacked in response to the latest detentions and in preparation for the 'Detainees Friday'" [in Arabic], Watan.com, December 27, 2012, <http://www.watan.com/news/world-news/2012-12-19/17708>.

<sup>109</sup> "Hacker' penetrates 17 Saudi sites and register them I 'Zone-h'" [in Arabic], Sabq.org, December 31, 2012, <http://sabq.org/qBtfde>

<sup>110</sup> "Anonymous hacked into Al-Raeis Twitter account" [in Arabic], Sabq.org, January 4, 2013, <http://sabq.org/6Ptfde>