

JORDAN

	2009	2011
INTERNET FREEDOM STATUS	n/a	Partly Free
Obstacles to Access	n/a	12
Limits on Content	n/a	11
Violations of User Rights	n/a	19
Total	n/a	42

POPULATION: 6.5 million
INTERNET PENETRATION: 28 percent
WEB 2.0 APPLICATIONS BLOCKED: No
SUBSTANTIAL POLITICAL CENSORSHIP: No
BLOGGERS/ONLINE USERS ARRESTED: Yes
PRESS FREEDOM STATUS: Not Free

INTRODUCTION

Jordan, a small kingdom of about six million people, prides itself on offering relatively broad freedom to use the internet and officially blocks only one website. Nonetheless, internet users are aware that their browsing history, comments, and posted materials may be monitored by the authorities. The government's appreciation of this unique access to public opinions and reactions seemed to have outweighed, until recently, its impulses to control content and limit expression online. However, the new law on cybercrimes, adopted in August 2010, contains several provisions that could be used to limit free expression on the internet, provoking vehement protests by web publishers and internet activists. The government had threatened earlier to introduce legislation covering internet use, but journalists and news website owners had pushed back, arguing that online material is already tempered by the self-censorship to which Jordanians have grown accustomed. Nonetheless, the government imposed the restrictive law, prompting speculations within the web community about the effects of its implementation.

Internet access was first provided to Jordanians in 1995, and the Telecommunications Regulatory Commission (TRC) was created that year to oversee the medium.¹ The authorities quickly recognized the economic potential of the internet and actively promoted the development of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in the kingdom.² Groups and individuals can obtain internet access through privately owned

¹ The TRC was established as a financially and administratively independent jurisdictional body through the Telecommunications Law (No. 13 of 1995) and a subsequent amendment (Law No. 8 of 2002).

² Privacy International, "Jordan," in *Silenced: An International Report on Censorship and Control of the Internet* (London: Privacy International, 2003), [http://www.privacyinternational.org/article.shtml?cmd\[347\]=x-347-103564](http://www.privacyinternational.org/article.shtml?cmd[347]=x-347-103564).

service providers, and no special state approval or registration is required, but traffic must still flow through the government telecommunications hub.³ As the number of internet users began doubling and tripling each year, the government responded by stepping up both infrastructure expansion and monitoring. Although the authorities are aware of the need to develop the ICT sector for the country's survival and progress, they are nonetheless concerned about the information and the freedom that the internet can bring to the people.

OBSTACLES TO ACCESS

According to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), there were 1,741,900 internet users in Jordan in 2009, representing about 27.6 percent of the population.⁴ Most internet users are still young people ranging in age from 15 to 24,⁵ but the medium, once seen as a tool for trivial entertainment and the exchange of scandalous or banned information, has grown into a vital instrument for business and an important forum for public discussion. About two-fifths of Jordanian families were reported to have personal computers as of early 2009, and the number of broadband subscribers reached 203,500 that year, up from just 24,000 at the end of 2005. Mobile-telephone use has also expanded rapidly; there were about 3.1 million subscribers in 2005, but by early 2010 the number of subscriptions had exceeded the total population.⁶

There are frequent government initiatives to encourage schools and universities to offer internet access. A program aimed at providing every student with a laptop computer is ongoing, and over 11,000 laptops have been sold to university students at discounted prices.⁷ Other initiatives have focused on establishing and modernizing the infrastructure required to support ICT-assisted instruction. By 2009, 72 percent of learners were entitled to use internet laboratories at school as a pedagogical aid, and 80 percent of schools had internet-assisted instruction.⁸

Expansion of internet access has been hampered by the cost of computers and connectivity. For the past several years, internet connection fees were considered high in comparison with neighboring countries and with the cost of living. Prices have decreased reportedly upon direct orders from the king, but complaints about the level of service have

³ Ibid.

⁴ International Telecommunications Union (ITU), "ICT Statistics 2009—Internet," <http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/icteye/Indicators/Indicators.aspx#>.

⁵ Mohammad Ghazal, "Jordan, UAE Firms in Talks over Free IT Zone," *Jordan Times*, May 16, 2009, <http://www.jordantimes.com/?news=16742>.

⁶ International Telecommunications Union (ITU), "ICT Statistics 2009—Mobile Cellular Subscriptions," <http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/icteye/Indicators/Indicators.aspx#>; "Number of cellular subscribers in Jordan exceeds the number of inhabitants," *Jordan Zad*, November 21, 2009, <http://www.jordanzad.com/jordan/print.php?a=27318>.

⁷ Ghazal, "Jordan, UAE Firms in Talks over Free IT Zone."

⁸ ITU, "World Telecommunication Development Report" (Target 7), http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/publications/wtdr_10/material/WTDR2010_Target7_e.pdf.

persisted. Monthly internet subscription prices currently range from 14 Jordanian Dinars (JD) (US\$20) for the speed of 128 kilobytes per second (kbps) to about 30 JD (US\$42) for the speed of up to 2 megabytes per second (mbps) for uploads and 10 mbps for downloads. These charges are often twice as much for subscriptions in an office setting. Clients often claim that connection speeds fluctuate and do not correspond to what they pay for. Moreover, internet access in remote areas remains poor; almost all companies concentrate their operations and promotions in the capital, Amman.

The government does not generally block access to digital media. In fact, web 2.0 applications and sites—including global platforms like the social-networking site Facebook, the microblogging service Twitter, and the video-sharing site YouTube—are very popular, particularly among younger Jordanians. The number of Jordanian subscribers to Facebook has surpassed 1.2 million in December 2010, with women accounting for an estimated 42 percent of the total.⁹

The telecommunications and internet sector is bound by Law No. 13 of 1995 and its amendment, Law No. 8 of 2002. The law endorses open-market policies and principles, governs licensing and quality assurance, and prescribes fines and one month to one year in prison for the distribution of improperly obtained content from any internet or telephone communication.¹⁰

There are currently 11 major internet-service providers (ISPs) in Jordan, though licenses have been granted to over 20 companies. The market is dominated by Omniyah, Zain, and the Jordan Telecom Group, the local affiliate of France Telecom Group's Orange brand. The formerly state-owned Jordan Telecom controls the fixed-line network and provides access to all other ISPs, thereby centralizing the connection to the international internet. Orange Internet, with over 60 percent of all fixed-line broadband subscriptions, is the largest ISP. In March 2010, Orange announced the launch of the country's first third-generation (3G) mobile network, which is expected to contribute to growing internet penetration in the kingdom.

LIMITS ON CONTENT

Jordanian authorities in recent years have appeared uncertain about internet freedom and how best to regulate it. Recurrent threats to filter websites and censor online content have surfaced when political discussions on news websites grow heated, and rarely does a year go by without new legislation or court rulings aimed at the media sector. Even a fellow news

⁹ "Jordan—Data for 12/16/2010," Checkfacebook.com, Accessed on February 15, 2011

¹⁰ Arabic Network for Human Rights Information, "Jordan," in *One Social Network With A Rebellious Message* (Cairo: Arabic Network for Human Rights Information, 2009), <http://www.openarab.net/en/node/1618>.

outlet, the daily newspaper *Al-Ghad*, criticized news websites in 2009 and called on the government to impose more restrictions on online content.

Government officials met with journalists at a 2009 conference of the Jordan Press Association, during a period of legal attacks on news websites. Reaching a reconciliation with the journalists, they pledged to drop pending lawsuits and refrain from issuing legislation to censor online content. However, in January 2010, the Court of Cassation ruled that websites and electronic media must comply with the Press and Publications Law. The ruling raised concerns among media freedom advocates that the content restrictions already imposed on newspapers would be formally extended to online outlets.¹¹

Even without specific legislation, website owners often remove material after receiving informal complaints via telephone from government officials, members of the security services, party leaders, lawmakers, journalists, and ordinary users. In 2009–10, news websites have had to deal with waves of angry comments from the public whenever sensitive issues are tackled. It is often readers, in addition to state officials, who pressure websites to toe the line and respect traditions.

Outright blocking of websites by the authorities is rare. The only permanently blocked website is the US-based *Arab Times* newspaper, which often takes a critical tone toward Arab regimes and prominent figures in Arab countries.¹² In 2008, the Amman municipality decided to block 600 websites on its internal network, including all Jordanian news websites and newspapers.¹³ According to the authorities, this step was taken to prevent municipality employees from wasting time while surfing the net, although several outlets questioned this explanation and suggested that the decision was made due to their critical coverage of the municipal government. Similarly, in August 2010, the state government blocked access to 40 websites from its internal network after a study suggested that public service employees were spending hours surfing websites not related to their work.¹⁴

Blogs in Jordan, which initially contributed to residents' discovery of the internet as a free source of information, seem to have lost some of their influence. They blossomed at the end of 2005, when bloggers successfully and professionally covered the terrorist attacks on three hotels in Amman. These outlets were quick to respond to the events comprehensively, offering photography and video that traditional media did not provide.¹⁵ Although Jordan's blogosphere flourished for a time after the attacks, it remained marginalized. Online readers

¹¹ Hani Hazaimah, "Court Ruling Threatens Press Freedom—Activists," *Jordan Times*, January 15, 2010, <http://www.jordantimes.com/?news=23196>.

¹² See "Jordan" OpenNet Initiative, August 6, 2009, <http://opennet.net/research/profiles/jordan>.

¹³ Arab Archives Institute, "Fear of Freedoms: King Insists on Freedoms, Government Resists," news release, December 6, 2008, http://www.ifex.org/jordan/2008/12/09/capsule_report_despite_advances/.

¹⁴ "Public Employees Wasting Time on the Internet," *Jordan Times*, August 5, 2010, <http://www.jordantimes.com/index.php?news=28938>.

¹⁵ Arabic Network for Human Rights Information, "Jordan."

tilted more toward political news websites, where they felt they were interacting with a larger audience and receiving more feedback on their comments.

The main blogs are produced by journalists seeking more freedom to post their views without their editors' predictable censorship. They still practice self-censorship and rarely cross the standard red lines, particularly concerning material that could be perceived as harmful to national security, national unity, the country's economy, or the royal family. The blogs' substantial difference from traditional media is the interaction they allow between journalists and their readers. Anonymous comments are permitted on most blogs and readers often take different virtual identities when posting their opinions and complaints. Many blogs are also bilingual and accept feedback in both Arabic and English.

Popular blogs generally tackle human rights, corruption issues, and political developments. Blogs that emphasize the need for free expression include the *Black Iris of Jordan* (<http://www.black-iris.com>), *What's Up in Jordan?* (<http://ajloun.blogspot.com>), *360east* (<http://www.360east.com>), and *7iber* (<http://www.7iber.com>). Osama Romoh's blog (<http://osamaa.com>) was named best weblog by Deutsche Welle users in June 2010. The Jordanian blogger writes satirically about social issues and developments in his country. Female bloggers such as Lina Ejeilat, one of the founders of *7iber*, are also making headway and finding more freedom of expression online; for decades, traditional newspapers had reserved the important news coverage and opinion columns for male writers. Social networking tools were also used during the November 2010 elections, and in at least one instance, were important for uncovering allegations of fraud.¹⁶

VIOLATIONS OF USER RIGHTS

Laws that hinder free expression and access to information include the Jordan Press Association Law (1998), the penal code (1960), the Defense Law (1992), the Contempt of Court Law (1959), the Protection of State Secrets and Classified Documents Law (1971), and the Press and Publications Law (1999). These measures reflect a culture of secrecy that has persisted since the end of martial law in 1989. An Access to Information Law was enacted in 2007, but it contains a number of restrictions. For example, the law bars public requests for information involving religious, racial, ethnic, or gender discrimination (article 10), and allows officials to withhold all types of classified information, a very broad category (Article 13).¹⁷

The government passed a new cybercrime law in August 2010, despite protests from online activists. The law, which proscribes penalties for cybercrimes such as hacking and

¹⁶ Betsy Fisher, "Jordan: Tweets Cover Parliamentary Elections Flaws," Global Voices, November 10, 2010, <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2010/11/10/jordan-tweets-cover-parliamentary-election-flaws/>.

¹⁷ Arab Archives Institute, "Summary of the Study on Access to Information Law in Jordan," June 2005, <http://www.alarchief.com/reports/englishFiles/accessToInformation.pdf>.

online identity theft, also contains several provisions that could be easily used to suppress free online expression. For example, the new law prohibits posting any information on the web already not available to the public concerning national security, foreign affairs, the national economy, and public safety. It also prohibits publishing any form of “defamation, contempt, or slander,” but it does not specify what constitutes each of those crimes. Moreover, the law allows the police to conduct searches and access computers at online media outlets without previously obtaining a warrant from public prosecutors. In protest to the new law, several news sites have expressed interest in registering out of Lebanon.

So far, Jordan’s leadership has placed emphasis on reconciliation over severe punishment when dealing with its domestic opponents. Nevertheless, some online commentators have faced legal harassment. Some 20 legal cases were reportedly filed against Jordan-based news websites in 2009.¹⁸ In one instance, Khaled Mahadin, a leading columnist and former adviser to the late king Hussein, was dragged in and out of court for months after criticizing the personal expenses of parliament members. In an article published on the news website Khaberni, Mahadin urged the king to dissolve the parliament because of the “illegal privileges” enjoyed by its members at the expense of Jordanian taxpayers.¹⁹ He was acquitted of defamation in late April, but at the age of 68, exercising freedom of opinion proved costly to his health.

The threat presented by the restrictive laws that remain on the books, combined with an awareness of extensive content monitoring, has a chilling effect on expression online. Bloggers and news website owners often complain directly or indirectly about their inability to post news freely due to monitoring. Jordanians are careful when they talk on mobile phones, and extra prudent about what they say at public meetings. This attitude has passed naturally to the internet, where every word and comment is not only read but documented by date, internet-protocol (IP) address, and location. In a 2010 case that solidified this suspicion, a Jordanian college student Imad Al-Ash was sentenced to two years in prison after security forces accused him of insulting the king in an instant message to a friend and posting “controversial religious opinions” in public online forums.²⁰

Cybercafes, where users might otherwise write with more anonymity, have been bombarded with a series of restrictive regulations and instructions over the past decade. Beginning in the summer of 2010, operators have been obliged to install security cameras to monitor customers, who in turn must supply personal identification information before they use the internet. Café owners are required to retain the browsing history of users for at least

¹⁸ Oula Farawati, “Jordan’s News Websites Running for Legal Cover,” *Menassat*, March 11, 2009, <http://www.menassat.com/?q=ar/comment/reply/6143>.

¹⁹ Reporters Without Borders, “Court Acquits Well-Known Columnist of Defaming Parliament,” news release, April 29, 2009, <http://en.rsf.org/jordan-court-acquits-well-known-columnist-29-04-2009,32743.html>.

²⁰ Ahmad Al-Shagra, “Jordanian Student Sentenced to 2 Years Over IM,” *The Next Web*, July 19, 2010, <http://thenextweb.com/me/2010/07/19/royal-ash-jordanian-student-sentenced-to-jail-for-2-years-over-im/>.

six months.²¹ Authorities claim these restrictions are needed for security reasons. In any case, the once-thriving cybercafe business is now in decline due to the restrictions as well as the decrease in the cost of home connections.

In addition to government monitoring, news websites and online writers face intimidation by traditionalist readers, who flood their comments sections with threatening messages in a bid to muzzle independent thought and free expression. Moreover, websites such as Ammonnews.net, Khaberni.com, and Jorday.net have been subjected to hacking attacks whenever sensitive material is posted or during times of social tension.

²¹ International Freedom of Expression Exchange, “Cyber crime law attacks free expression; Internet cafés monitored,” August 18, 2010, http://www.ifex.org/jordan/2010/08/18/cyber_cafe/