UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

	2012	2013
INTERNET FREEDOM STATUS	N/A	NOT FREE
Obstacles to Access (0-25)	n/a	13
Limits on Content (0-35)	n/a	22
Violations of User Rights (0-40)	n/a	31
Total (0-100)	**n/a**	**66**

* 0=most free, 100=least free

POPULATION: 8.1 million
INTERNET PENETRATION 2012: 85 percent
SOCIAL MEDIA/ICT APPS BLOCKED: Yes
POLITICAL/SOCIAL CONTENT BLOCKED: Yes
BLOGGERS/ICT USERS ARRESTED: Yes
PRESS FREEDOM 2013 STATUS: Not Free

KEY DEVELOPMENTS: MAY 2012 – APRIL 2013

- The state continued to block certain political and social websites, as well as pornography, gambling sites, and other content deemed offensive to public order, religion, or morality (see **LIMITS ON CONTENT**).
- The new cybercrime law introduced in 2012 outlined harsh punishments for users who post content that is critical of the state, is offensive to religion, or violates another's right to privacy (see **VIOLATIONS OF USER RIGHTS**).
- Scores of users were detained and given 7 to 15 year sentences for their online activity, including several belonging to the so-called "UAE 94" group of political detainees (see **VIOLATIONS OF USER RIGHTS**).

INTRODUCTION

The government of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has embraced information and communications technology (ICT) as a means of developing a competitive economy and improving citizen services. The internet was introduced to the country in 1995 and internet penetration has quickly risen.[1] The UAE is ranked 25th in the World Economic Forum's 2013 Networked Readiness Index[2] and scored 28th in the United Nations 2012 E-Governance Survey.[3] However, while remaining open to receiving large amounts of foreign investment and expatriate workers, the government has actively fought to deter political discussions, demands for reforms, and criticism of public officials online.

The wealthy Gulf state has taken several moves to restrict access to online tools that challenge the government's authoritarian grip on both politics and telecommunications. Numerous websites are blocked and search results are filtered in order to prevent access to local and international voices that differ from the state line, particularly on political, religious, and sexual matters. Responding to the growing use of social media to call for political reforms and document government abuses, a new cybercrime law was issued in 2012. The law provides harsh punishments for a wide range of vague offenses, such as criticizing the country's rulers and religion. These laws, combined with a judiciary that fundamentally lacks independence, create a highly problematic legal environment where users cannot be guaranteed that their constitutional and internationally recognized rights will be upheld.

The first reported instance of law enforcement bodies targeting ICT use for political motives occurred in July 2010, when an 18-year-old named Badr al-Dhohri was held in Abu Dhabi for using his Blackberry to pass along a message that called for a protest against increases to the price of gasoline. Later, a man named "Saud" was arrested for organizing the unsuccessful protest, while five other citizens were summoned for investigation.[4] As for online users, two members of the online discussion forum UAE Hewar were arrested in April 2011 in one of the first documented cases in the country. One of those detained was the prominent blogger and activist Ahmed Mansoor, whose arrest sparked online campaigns calling for his release. A third user was arrested for criticizing the authoritarian practices of Gulf governments.[5]

More recently, dozens have been detained for their political discussions on online forums and social media. Many have indicated that they were held without charge, denied the right to an attorney,

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[1] Internet in UAE. International Telecommunications Union. 2001. Accessed June 25, 2013,
http://www.itu.int/arabinternet2001/documents/pdf/document25.pdf
[2] Benat Bilbao-Osorio, Soumitra Dutta, Bruno Lanvin, eds. "The Global Information Technology Report 2013," World Economic Forum, accessed June 6, 2013, http://www.weforum.org/reports/global-information-technology-report-2013/.
[3] United Nations Public Administration Network. "Emirates global leader in e-Readiness, says UN eGovernment Survey 2012." May 15, 2012.
http://www.unpan.org/PublicAdministrationNews/tabid/651/mctl/ArticleView/ModuleID/1555/articleId/31395/default.aspx
[4] Reporters Without Borders. "Wave of Arrests of Blackberry messenger users." 29 July 2010. http://en.rsf.org/united-arab-emirates-wave-of-arrests-of-blackberry-29-07-2010,38048.html
[5] Reuters. "Arrested UAE blogger accused of possessing alcohol." April 12, 2011.
http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/04/12/us-emirates-activists-idUSTRE73B2EP20110412

and tortured. Mobile phones must be registered and—for most of the coverage period—Voice-over-Internet-Protocol (VoIP) applications were banned to facilitate government monitoring and protect the state's monopoly on phone services. The country's two mobile phone and internet service providers are either directly or indirectly owned by the state, reflecting a lack of checks and balances in government requests for surveillance data. Numerous crackdowns on users have increased self-censorship on social media and online news outlets, of which the most prominent are government-owned.

Some Emiratis have continued to push back against government repression and intimidation by channeling their strong digital literacy into online activism, writing blogs and calling for political reform on social networks. In the face of prosecution, activists still use online tools to highlight human rights violations and pass on messages from relatives in prison. Nonetheless, the online environment in the UAE is not free, and users face many challenges to freedom of expression online.

OBSTACLES TO ACCESS

Similarly to other Gulf States, Emirati users enjoy a robust information and communications technology (ICT) infrastructure and high connection speeds. In the International Telecommunication Union's (ITU) 2012 ICT Development Index, the UAE ranked 45th in the world and among the top five in the region.[6] The number of internet users has risen rapidly from a penetration rate of 61 percent in 2007 to 85 percent in 2012.[7] As of April 2013, there were 997,675 internet subscribers, 99 percent of which had broadband connections.[8]

While the use of broadband is widespread, prices are extraordinarily high; the UAE has one of the most expensive broadband rates in the world, with high-end subscriptions costing more than AED 8,000 ($2,178) a year. However, the UAE ranks 29th in the ITU's 2012 ICT Price Basket Index, in which local broadband prices are measured against gross national income (GNI) per capita.[9] This reflects a sense that despite the high prices, the internet remains affordable for most Emiratis, though not necessarily to all migrant workers. Prices have been steadily dropping in recent years and,[10] in May 2012, the telecommunications company Etisalat announced a further 50 percent cut in broadband subscription costs.[11]

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[6] International Telecommunication Union (ITU), "Measuring the Information Society 2012 – ICT Development Index (IDI)", accessed June 7, 2013, available at http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/publications/idi/material/2012/IDI-ranking.pdf.

[7] International Telecommunication Union (ITU), "Percentage of individuals using the Internet," 2001 and 2012, accessed June 2, 2013, http://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx.

[8] Telecommunications Regulatory Authority. "Latest Statistics." Accessed July 2, 2013. http://www.tra.gov.ae/latest_statistics.php

[9] International Telecommunications Union (ITU), "Measuring the Information Society," 2012, available at http://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Documents/publications/mis2012/MIS2012_without_Annex_4.pdf.

[10] Ben Flanagan. "UAE subscribers paying high price for broadband." Aug 16, 2011 http://www.thenational.ae/business/technology/uae-subscribers-paying-high-price-for-broadban

[11] "Etisalat to cut broadband rates by 50%." Emirates 24/7. May 20, 2012. http://www.emirates247.com/news/emirates/etisalat-to-cut-broadband-rates-by-50-2012-05-20-1.459470

The UAE has one of the highest mobile phone penetration rates in the region with nearly 170 percent or 11.7 million subscribers in 2012.[12] Out of 26 countries that participated in a Google survey of smartphone penetration, the UAE was ranked first, with 61 percent of mobile phone users reporting that they own smartphones.[13]

According to UNICEF, literacy in the Emirates was reported at 94 percent among males and 97 percent among females, thereby not constituting a strong obstacle to internet use.[14] In 2006, the country decided to include computer laboratories in public schools, thereby seeking to improve computer literacy among the youth.[15]

The two internet service providers (ISPs) in the UAE are "Etisalat" and "du." Both companies have launched their own carrier-neutral international internet exchange points, Smarthub and Datamena, respectively.[16] Cuts to undersea cables have disrupted internet access for Emirati users on several occasions, though government-instituted outages are not known. In March 2013, Etisalat warned that users would face slower speeds due to the cutting of a fiber-optic cable off of the Mediterranean coast of Egypt.[17] Du suffered similar disruptions in April 2010 and March 2011 due to cuts to the SEA-ME-WE 4 cable.[18] In 2008, 1.7 million users in the UAE were affected by undersea damage to submarine cables occurring at five separate locations around the globe.[19]

Both telecommunications companies are, directly or indirectly, owned by the state. The UAE government maintains a 60 percent stake in Etisalat through its ownership in the Emirates Investment Company,[20] while a majority of du is owned by various state companies.[21] Etisalat used to dominate the telecommunication market until 2006, when du was granted a working license. Since 2006, no new providers have been licensed, though there is no information on whether new applications were submitted. The two companies are also the major mobile phone operators. Providers fall under the laws and regulations set by the TRA, which has been headed by Mohamed Nasser Al Ghanim since its establishment in 2004. Its tasks include licensing, conducting surveys, promoting investment, and assigning websites to the ".ae" top-level country domain.[22]

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[12] International Telecommunication Union (ITU), "Percentage of individuals using mobile cellular telephones," 2012, accessed June 2, 2013, http://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx.

[13] Google. "Our Mobile Planet: United Arab Emirates." Accessed April 20, 2013. http://bit.ly/MOD7dt.

[14] UNICEF. "United Arab Emirates: Statistics." Accessed at June 25, 2013. http://uni.cf/lgxga0.

[15] Library of Congress – Federal Research Division. "Country Profile: United Arab Emirates (UAE)," July 2007, http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/profiles/UAE.pdf.

[16] "Etisalat launches internet exchange hub," CommsMEA, November 19, 2012, http://bit.ly/1hfcJEE.

[17] Claire Valdini. "UAE Etisalat users face disruption after cable cut," Arabian Business, March 28, 2013. http://www.arabianbusiness.com/uae-etisalat-users-face-disruption-after-cable-cut-495772.html

[18] SeaMeWe-4 refers to the South East Asia – Middle East – Western Europe – 4 cable. Hassan Hassan. "Cable cut may slow internet," The National, March 27, 2011. http://www.thenational.ae/news/uae-news/cable-cut-may-slow-internet

[19] Asma Ali Zain. "Cable damage hits 1.7m Internet users in UAE," Khaleej Times, February 5, 2008. http://bit.ly/1dS8tLD.

[20] Maher Chmaytelli, "Etisalat Plans to Allow Foreigners 'Soon,' Khaleej Says," Bloomberg, July 29, 2012, http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2012-07-29/etisalat-plans-to-allow-foreigners-soon-khaleej-says.html.

[21] du, "Shareholders structure," accessed June 7, 2013, http://www.du.ae/en/about/corporate-governance/shareholders.

[22] Telecommunications Regulatory Authority. "TRA's Board of Directors Endorses Several ICT Policy Issues and Approves the Authority's Budget for 2010," January 6, 2010. http://www.tra.gov.ae/news_TRA%92s_Board_of_Directors_Endorses_Several_ICT_Policy_Issues_and_Approves_the_Authority%92s_Budget_for_2010-135-36.php

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LIMITS ON CONTENT

Online censorship has increased in the UAE following the Arab uprisings of 2011. The authorities have blocked numerous websites and web forums where users openly call for political reforms or criticize the government. While self-censorship is pervasive, the ongoing crackdown against online dissent points to the fact that a limited number of users continue to use their real names when addressing sensitive issues. The families of political detainees use social media to highlight human rights abuses and communicate on behalf of their loved ones. Twitter, for example, is highly important in an online media landscape that is dominated by state-run news sites that refuse to cover controversial trials or stray too far from the state's overall narrative. These factors contribute to a highly-controlled online environment in which freedom of expression and the right to information is not respected.

The availability of VoIP services in the UAE is shrouded in doubt and disputes between the country's two telecommunications companies, Etisalat and du, and the TRA. In the past, many aspects of VoIP applications were blocked by both providers and Skype was classified by the TRA as an "unlicensed VoIP." When users landed on the Skype website, a notice appeared stating, "Access to this site is currently blocked. The site falls under the Prohibited Content Categories of the UAE's Internet Access Management Policy."[23] Similar products such as Viber or Apple's Facetime were also banned; [24] in fact, Apple agreed to sell its iPhone4 products to UAE mobile phone companies without the Facetime application preinstalled.[25] However, on numerous occasions the TRA has emphasized that it is up to the mobile phone providers to license these products. Etisalat and du currently offer their own prepaid VoIP cards, although their prices are higher than those listed by Skype.

Changes arrived on March 19, 2013, when du subscribers suddenly reported no obstacles in accessing the Skype website or in making Skype-to-phone calls. Etisalat announced that it would follow suit one month later.[26] After initial reports from the TRA indicated that Skype users could still face fines of AED 1 million ($272,000) or two years imprisonment, the regulatory denied that it had made these statements and reiterated that the availability of Skype is a matter for the two telecommunications companies.[27] BlackBerry services have been restricted since 2010, when the government introduced a regulation allowing only companies with more than 20 BlackBerry

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[23] Kyle Sinclair, "Mobile subscribers in UAE get access to Skype calls, but for how long," The National, March 20, 2013, http://www.thenational.ae/news/uae-news/mobile-subscribers-in-uae-get-access-to-skype-calls-but-for-how-long.

[24] "Viber seeks to circumvent ban in Middle East," The National, June 10, 2013, http://www.thenational.ae/news/uae-news/viber-seeks-ways-to-circumvent-ban-in-middle-east.

[25] Reporters Without Boarders. "Countries Under Surveillance: United Arab Emirates." March 11, 2011. http://en.rsf.org/united-arab-emirates-united-arab-emirates-11-03-2011,39760.html

[26] Matt Smith, "UAE telco Etisalat says unblocks Skype website," Reuters, April 8, 2013, http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/04/08/us-emirates-etisalat-skype-idUSBRE9370HO20130408.

[27] Colin Simpson, "UAE Skype users will not face jail or Dh1 million fine, confirms telecom regulator," The National, May 12, 2013, http://www.thenational.ae/news/uae-news/uae-skype-users-will-not-face-jail-or-dh1-million-fine-confirms-telecom-regulator.

accounts to access the encrypted BlackBerry Messenger service.[28] Despite these limitations, circumvention software and proxies are commonly used by Emiratis to access blocked content[29] and VoIP services.[30]

While the TRA has claimed that it is not chiefly responsible for the unavailability of VoIP, the regulator does instruct ISPs to block content related to terrorism, pornography, and gambling, as well as websites that contain political speech threatening to the ruling order. According to a recent report from CitizenLab, ISPs in the UAE have used tools such as SmartFilter and NetSweeper to censor content. CitizenLab also found five installations of Blue Coat ProxySG in the country's network linked to Etisalat.[31] Although YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and international blog-hosting services are freely available, controversial terms are often filtered from search results within these sites.

The TRA, working with the Ministry of Communications, has also blocked five hundred search terms.[32] For example, a Twitter user reported that a web forum on atheism, offered on the popular site Reddit, is blocked in the UAE.[33] Specific searches on the photo-sharing website Flickr are also filtered. In December 2012, searches for the Egyptian comedian and television host Bassem Youssef resulted in a generic error message, leading Twitter users to speculate that this was a result of the letters "a-s-s" appearing in the comedian's first name. Etisalat responded to the criticism by tweeting that users can submit a request for the content to be unblocked and provided a link to the "Contact Us" page of the Etisalat website. The videos have since been unblocked.[34] In September 2012, the controversial "Innocence of Muslim" film trailer was made inaccessible on YouTube.[35] A BBC report on detained Emirati activists was also blocked in July 2012, though access to other parts of the BBC website was not affected.[36]

According to Herdict, the crowdsourcing tool that lets users report blocked content, internet users from the UAE have reported several social, political, LGBTQ, and proxy sites blocked in their country.[37] For example, the Lebanese queer and feminist e-magazine *Bekhsoos*[38] and the U.S.-based Arab Lesbian e-magazine *Bint El Nas* are both blocked.[39] Many websites displaying religious content

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[28] "Use of Most Secure BlackBerry System Restricted, Blogger Arrested." Reporters Without Borders. April 28, 2011. http://en.rsf.org/united-arab-emirates-use-of-most-secure-blackberry-28-04-2011,40123.html

[29] Stuart Turton, "Dubai's dubious internet censorship," September 6, 2010, http://www.pcpro.co.uk/blogs/2010/09/06/dubais-dubious-internet-censorship/

[30] Triska Hamid, "Telecoms revenues threatened by Skype," The National, April 10, 2013, http://www.thenational.ae/business/industry-insights/telecoms/telecoms-revenues-threatened-by-skype.

[31] "Appendix A: Summary Analysis of Blue Coat 'Countries of Interest'," CitizenLab, January 15, 2013, https://citizenlab.org/2013/01/appendix-a-summary-analysis-of-blue-coat-countries-of-interest/.

[32] Reporters Without Borders. "Countries Under Surveillance: United Arab Emirates," accessed in June 25, 2013, http://en.rsf.org/surveillance-united-arab-emirates,39760.html

[33] https://twitter.com/vbentley/status/326696995546882049

[34] https://twitter.com/SultanAlQassemi/status/283315170598596608

[35] Daniel Shane. "Access to anti-Islam film blocked in UAE." September 18, 2012. http://www.arabianbusiness.com/access-anti-islam-film-blocked-in-uae-473462.html

[36] https://twitter.com/ECHRIGHTS/status/230334658129321985

[37] Herdict. Quick Stats: United Arab Emirates. Accessed April 28, 2013. http://www.herdict.org/explore/indepth?fc=AE

[38] http://www.bekhsoos.com/web/

[39] http://www.bintelnas.org/

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are blocked, including the famous blog of atheist Emirati blogger Ben Kerishan[40] and an Arab Christian online forum named The Church Network.[41]

In the past two years, political content has been the focus of state censorship. Examples include the Arab-American News website *Arab Times*,[42] the secular pan-Arab online forum "Modern Discussion,"[43] and the California-based Arabic online newspaper *Watan*, all blocked in September 2012.[44] A website disseminating news of the trial of 94 Emirati political detainees was also blocked in 2013.[45] The anonymous website "UAE University Watch"[46] and "UAE Prison," which exposes violations against jailed expatriates, have both been blocked.[47] "Emaraty Bedoon," the blog of the stateless individual Ahmed Abdulkhaleq who was deported to Thailand in July 2012 for his political activism, is also blocked.[48]

Authorities continue to ban inactive sites such as the political forum "UAE Hewar" and the blogs "Secret Dubai Diary"[49] and "UAE Torture."[50] The latter posted a torture video taken in 2004 in which a member of the ruling family was shown to have tortured an Afghan man. The suspect was acquitted in 2010 in a case that was widely believed to be a show trial.[51] A request to unblock UAE Hewar was rejected by the Federal Supreme Court in July 2012, [52] and its Facebook page is also blocked due to its criticism of the regime and state corruption.[53] As part of a verdict, in which five users were sentenced 7 to 15 years for violating the constitution and cooperating with foreign political organizations (see "Violations of User Rights"), a court also ordered the blocking of five websites that are already inaccessible in the country. These included the Emirates Media and Studies Center (EMASC); The Seven Emirates, which focuses on the seven activists who had their citizenship revoked for their political activities; the Watan news website; the Islah political group website; and the Yanabeea.net educational network.[54]

Under the 2012 cybercrime law, website owners and employees "may be held liable" for any violations occurring on their sites, including defamation charges.[55] In May 2012, Dubai police

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[40] http://benkerishan.blogspot.com/

[41] http://www.arabchurch.com/

[42] http://www.arabtimes.com/

[43] http://www.ahewar.org/

[44] ANHRI. "Kuwait: News website blocked." March 22, 2012. http://beta1.anhri.net/en/?p=7521

[45] The Arabic Network for Human Rights Information. "UAE: ANHRI Denounces Blocking a Website Address the News of the Detainees." April 18, 2013. http://www.anhri.net/en/?p=12262

[46] http://www.uaeuniversitywatch.net/

[47] http://uaeprison.com/

[48] http://www.emaratybedoon.blogspot.com/

[49] http://secretdubai.blogspot.com/

[50] http://www.uaetorture.com/

[51] Mackey, Robert. "Abu Dhabi Royal Acquitted in Torture Trial." January 11, 2010. http://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/01/11/abu-dhabi-royal-acquitted-in-torture-trial/

[52] Magdy Zahr el-Dine, "Appeal Rejected to Unblock Website," Al-Khaleej, 5 July, 2011. http://www.rakland.net/vb/showthread.php?t=7458

[53] Reporters Without Boarders. "Countries Under Surveillance: United Arab Emirates." March 11, 2011. http://en.rsf.org/united-arab-emirates-united-arab-emirates-11-03-2011,39760.html

[54] "68 members of Islah jailed for terrorism," AlShahed newspaper, July 3, 2013. http://www.alshahedkw.com/index.php?option=com_content&id=95366:---68-----&Itemid=457

[55] Awad Mustafa and Ramona Ruiz. "Cyber-crime law to fight internet abuse and protect privacy in the UAE." November 13, 2012. http://www.thenational.ae/news/uae-news/cyber-crime-law-to-fight-internet-abuse-and-protect-privacy-in-the-uae

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succeeded in shutting down 15 accounts on Facebook and Twitter for "defamation and abuse" by sending letters to both companies outlining the offenses committed under the UAE law.[56] In a case dating from July 2009, a court suspended the website and newspaper *Al Emarat Al Youm* for 20 days for running a story about the doping of a race horse owned by two sons of the country's president.[57]

Decisions to block or remove online content often lack procedural transparency or judicial oversight. The telecommunications company du details what criteria it used to block websites in a document available on its website. Prohibited content includes information related to circumvention tools, the promotion of criminal activities, the sale or promotion of illegal drugs, dating networks, pornography, homosexuality, gambling, phishing, spyware, unlicensed VoIP services, terrorism, and material that is offensive to religion. [58]

No similar list was made available by Etisalat, although the company does have a space on its website where users can request that a website be blocked or unblocked.[59] In 2005, an Etisalat spokesman stated that the company is not responsible for internet blocking and revealed that all complaints and requests are passed on to the Ministry of Information. He also claimed that a list of websites to be blocked is compiled by an American company and then implemented through a proxy server.[60] Apart from the previously mentioned unblocking of Bassem Youssef's videos, incidents of users successfully unblocking a website are not known.[61] Indeed, writing in an online forum, users have noted that their requests to have websites unblocked did not receive any response from companies.[62]

Local news websites, many of which are owned by the state, employ a large degree of self-censorship in accordance with government regulations and unofficial "red lines." Gulf News, The National, and Emirates 24/7 are among the different online media outlets suffering such restrictions. Nonetheless, since the regional uprisings of 2011, Emiratis have begun to tackle sensitive issues more boldly over the internet, particularly on social media. Users express their opinions, share information on arrests and trials, and even attempt to organize protests. However, most users remain anonymous when criticizing state officials or religion out of fears of legal action or harassment. While there is no available evidence to prove the government's involvement in hiring public relations firms or bloggers to spread propaganda, a large number of anonymous Twitter users appear dedicated to harass and intimidate political dissidents and their families online.

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[56] http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/05/21/dubai-facebook-twitter-accounts-shut-down_n_1533633.html
[57] Reporters Without Borders. "Newspaper Suspended for 20 Days Over story Race Horse." July 7, 2009. http://en.rsf.org/united-arab-emirates-newspaper-suspended-for-20-days-07-07-2009,33730
[58] Du, "Prohibited Content Categories," July 29, 2008. http://www.du.ae/Documents/Annex%201-IAM%20Regulatory%20Policy%20ver%201%20%2029July2008.pdf
[59] Etisalat. "Blocking and Unblocking Internet Content." Accessed on April 28, 2013. http://www.etisalat.ae/eportal/en/corporate/blocking-unblocking.html
[60] Piers Grimley Evans. "Etisalat doesn't block websites," Gulf News, July 21, 2005. http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/uae/media/etisalat-doesn-t-block-websites-1.294723
[61] https://twitter.com/SultanAlQassemi/status/283315170598596608
[62] Expat Forum, "Do you ever request Etisalat or Du to unblock websites?" March 24, 2011. http://bit.ly/18FPnVR.

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In addition to the threat of harassment and prosecution, Emirati authorities also use financial means to limit the ability of antigovernment websites to produce content online. For example, the government reportedly pressured Dubai-based advertising agency "Echo" to end its advertising contract with the U.S.-based news outlet Watan. A complaint was also allegedly submitted to the FBI against the website, claiming it calls for the assassination of UAE rulers.[63] Nonetheless, users have access to a variety of local and international news outlets, even if there are disparate reports of blocking specific UAE-related articles from these sites.[64]

Social media use has increased in recent years, in line with regional trends. Facebook recently hit 3.4 million users in the UAE, representing a penetration of 68 percent,[65] while in 2013, 34 percent of all users possessed a Twitter account.[66] While the UAE did not witness protests on a scale similar to its Arab neighbors, Emiratis created petitions calling for reforms and conducted online activism to expose corruption and demand change. Currently, families of political prisoners rely on Twitter to speak on behalf of detainees, explaining their cases, spreading information about violations to their rights, and calling for their release. There are several examples of relatives who are active online, including Mariam al-Mansouri,[67] the wife of detained blogger Rashid al-Shamsi, and Aysha al-Thufiri, the daughter of detainee Salih al-Thufiri.[68] Social media networks have also proven useful in non-political campaigns, such as fundraising attempts to provide support to Syrian refugees.

VIOLATIONS OF USER RIGHTS

The rights of online users in the UAE are not protected by law, nor are they respected in practice. Several laws, including the penal code, publishing law, and cybercrime law, are commonly exploited to deter free expression and violate the rights of users. There is a general feeling among those who reside in the UAE that online tools are monitored and that surveillance is widely practiced with little judicial oversight. Several prominent online activists and ordinary citizens were detained in late 2012 and early 2013. In addition, this year saw numerous cases of torture, solitary confinement, and physical harassment registered against users.

Article 30 of the country's constitution states that "Freedom of opinion and expressing it verbally, in writing or by other means of expression shall be guaranteed within the limits of law."[69] However, the judicial system in the Emirates lacks independence and prosecutions are often

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[63] ANHRI. "UAE Continues its Serious Violations Against the Freedom of Opinion and Expression due to Blocking "Watan" Website." September 24, 2012. http://beta1.anhri.net/en/?p=9607
[64] https://twitter.com/ECHRIGHTS/status/230334658129321985
[65] "United Arab Emirates Facebook Statistics," Socialbakers, accessed April 20, 2013. http://www.socialbakers.com/facebook-statistics/united-arab-emirates
[66] AMEinfo.com "51% of Saudi internet users are active Twitter users: study." March 13, 2013. http://www.ameinfo.com/51-saudi-internet-users-active-twitter-333929
[67] https://twitter.com/MariamMansori
[68] https://twitter.com/Aysha_75
[69] U.A.E Cabinet. "Constitution of U.A.E." accessed July 31, 2013. http://uaecabinet.ae/en/UAEGovernment/Pages/UAE-Constitution.aspx#.UfqD6I21EwA [Arabic], "Constitution of the United Arab Emirates," Refworld.org, accessed August 1, 2013, http://www.refworld.org/docid/48eca8132.html.

pursued for political reasons.[70] In 2012, the president of the UAE appointed himself as head of the judiciary, overtaking the position of the minister of justice.[71] Human rights groups have continuously criticized the UAE for violating the human rights of political detainees and failing to provide them with fair and transparent trials. Instead, many are denied access to a lawyer, held without cause for extended periods of time, or tortured.[72] Furthermore, former detainees who have since been pardoned[73] are continually harassed and do not enjoy their full rights as citizens.[74]

Articles 8 and 176 of the penal code are used to punish public "insults" of the country's top officials, although these are widely used to prosecute any users that express a desire for political reform.[75] Articles 70 and 71 of the 1980 publishing law prohibit criticism of the head of the state and of Islam or any other religion.[76] Defamation laws have been criticized by lawyers as "all-encompassing" and clouded with many grey areas. The burden of proof is also upon the defendant. Penalties can be as high as two years imprisonment or a fine of AED 20,000 ($5,444).[77] In January 2011, the editor of Hetta.com was fined and his website was blocked for a month after a court upheld a defamation suit brought by the Abu Dhabi Media Company over defamatory and offensive user comments on the website.[78] In July 2011, Abu Dhabi police warned that spreading rumors through text messages constitutes libel and can be punishable by up to three years in jail.[79]

A new cybercrime law was issued in November 2012, replacing an earlier decree from 2006 that was criticized for being too vague.[80] While the introduction of the law was fundamental in providing a sounder legal basis to combat online fraud, money laundering, hacking, and other serious cybercrimes, the law also criminalizes a wide range of online activity commonly accepted within international norms. For example, hefty fines and jail sentences await users who engage in online gambling, disseminate pornographic material, or violate another person's privacy through posting their photograph or making statements about them online, regardless of the accuracy of the accusations. Intermediaries, such as domain hosts or administrators, are also liable if their websites are used to "prompt riot, hatred, racism, sectarianism, or damage the national unity or social peace

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[70] Human Rights Watch, "UAE: Investigate Threats against 'UAE 5'," November 25, 2011, http://www.hrw.org/news/2011/11/25/uae-investigate-threats-against-uae-5.

[71] Emirates 24/7, "UAE to give judiciary greater autonomy," June 27, 2012. http://www.emirates247.com/news/emirates/uae-to-give-judiciary-greater-autonomy-2012-06-27-1.464786

[72] Rori Donaghy, "Torture in the United Arab Emirates," HuffingtonPost.co.uk, September 24, 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/rori-donaghy/torture-in-the-united-ara_b_1908919.html.

[73] Human Rights Watch, "UAE: Free Speech Under Attack: Harassment, Arrests, Criminal Prosecutions," January 25, 2012. http://www.hrw.org/news/2012/01/25/uae-free-speech-under-attack

[74] Sara Yasin, "UAE 5 still face restrictions after pardon," Index on Censorship, accessed August 1, 2013, http://www.indexoncensorship.org/2012/01/uae5-mansoor-still-face-restrictions-after-pardon-emirates/.

[75] Human Rights Watch, "UAE: Free Speech Under Attack," January 25, 2012. http://www.hrw.org/news/2012/01/25/uae-free-speech-under-attack

[76] "Publications and Publishing Law 1980," accessed in June 25, 2013, http://nmc.gov.ae/en/MediaLawsAndRegulation/4.pdf

[77] Kevin Brass, "Defamation laws keep the aggrieved quiet," The National, November 8, 2011 http://www.thenational.ae/business/industry-insights/property/defamation-laws-keep-the-aggrieved-quiet

[78] Reporters Without Boarders. "Countries Under Surveillance: United Arab Emirates." March 11, 2011. http://en.rsf.org/united-arab-emirates-united-arab-emirates-11-03-2011,39760.html

[79] Abdulla Rasheed, "Misuse of instant messaging services punishable by law," Gulf News, July 26, 2011 http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/uae/crime/misuse-of-instant-messaging-services-punishable-by-law-1.843047

[80] Awad Mustafa and Ramona Ruiz. "Cyber-crime law to fight internet abuse and protect privacy in the UAE." November 13, 2012. http://www.thenational.ae/news/uae-news/cyber-crime-law-to-fight-internet-abuse-and-protect-privacy-in-the-uae

or prejudice the public order and public morals."[81] The cybercrime law also contains punishments for offending the state, its rulers, and its symbols, or for insulting Islam and other religions. Calls to change the ruling system are punishable by life imprisonment. Authorities have repeatedly warned foreign nationals that they must also follow the country's restrictive laws.[82]

Authorities regularly make use of these laws to prosecute Emirati citizens and residents for their online activities. In July 2012, stateless blogger Ahmed Abdulkhaleq was forcibly deported from the UAE to Thailand.[83] Abdulkhaleq was one of the five detainees ("the UAE 5") held in prison from April to November 2011 for demanding reforms through writings on the blocked online forum UAE Hewar. In May 2012, the UAE-born stateless man was given a Comoros passport, only to be arrested the following day and given the choice to go into exile or remain in jail.[84]

In July 2012, five users were held for their online posts on Twitter and blogs. The detainees faced charges of violating the constitution and cooperating with foreign political organizations.[85] The blogger Khalifa al-Nuaimi had previously written about "the UAE 5" and had been consistently threatened prior to his arrest.[86] Rashid al-Shamsi had tweeted news of arrests and written blog posts related to politics and free speech.[87] Twitter user Musabeh al-Rumaithy was arrested for his online writings in which he expressed support for the Islamist Islah party. He had been handed a travel ban one month before his arrest.[88] Similarly, Omran al-Radhwan had tweeted about "the UAE 5" detainees and wrote several posts promoting Islah and criticizing state violations of Shariah law.[89] Finally, Abdullah al-Hajri was arrested over the contents of his blog, in which he called for more government action to combat public immorality.[90] Al-Nuaimi, al-Shamsi, and al-Rumaithy were sentenced to 10 years imprisonment in July 2013 for being a member of a banned organization, while al-Radhwan and al-Hajri received 7 year sentences.[91] The sentenced users were part of a group of 68 activists set to serve 7 to 15 years in jail for the same charges.

In December 2012, 18-year-old blogger Mohammed Salem al-Zumer was arrested in the Emirate of Sharjah.[92] His online activities were found supportive of political detainees, including his uncle,

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[81] See Federal Decree-Law no. (5) of 2012 on Combating Cybercrimes, August 13, 2012, available online at: http://ejustice.gov.ae/downloads/latest_laws/cybercrimes_5_2012_en.pdf.
[82] Emirates News Agency, "New UAE cyber crime laws: Jail for indecent posts," Emirates 24/7, November 14, 2012, http://www.emirates247.com/news/government/new-uae-cyber-crime-laws-jail-for-indecent-posts-2012-11-14-1.482836
[83] Aljazeera. "UAE deports online activist to Thailand." July 16, 2012. http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/07/2012716172114669177.html
[84] Suzanne Trimel. "UAE Urged to Halt Arbitrary Arrests After Blogger's Forced Deportation." Amnesty. Accessed in April 28, 2013. http://bit.ly/MtGmZv.
[85] Roy Greenslade. "UAE detains journalist bloggers." 25 July 2012. http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/greenslade/2012/jul/25/united-arab-emirates-press-freedom
[86] https://kalnuaimi.wordpress.com/
[87] http://rashedalshamsi.blogspot.fr/
[88] "Another Emirati activist banned from Travel," Watan, June 28, 2012. http://bit.ly/19bVlBW.
[89] http://omran83.tumblr.com/
[90] http://alhajria.wordpress.com/
[91] Amnesty International, "UAE: Grossly unfair trial of government critics," July 2, 2013. http://www.amnesty.org/en/news/uae-critics-sentenced-2013-07-02
[92] BBC. "UAE authorities 'detain 18-year-old blogger'." 7 December 2012. http://bbc.in/VPHeYP.

Khaled al-Nuiami, who has come under torture since being held in July 2012.[93] Al-Zumer faces charges for editing and uploading videos supportive of political detainees and has yet to be tried. According to his mother, [94] the blogger has been held in solitary confinement, tortured, and pressured into making a confession stating that Khalifa al-Nuiami, another UAE94 defendant, had encouraged him to edit and upload the videos.[95] For his part, in September 2012 Khalifa al-Nuiami had embarked on a hunger strike to protest against psychological and physical torture by police officers.[96]

Saeed al-Shamsi was detained on December 14, 2012 over suspicions that he ran the anonymous Twitter account "Sout al-Haq" (@weldbudhabi). The account was targeted over allegations that it received leaked documents from the Interior Ministry, although the documents were never published. After al-Shamsi's arrest, the Sout al-Haq account sent a tweet in which he claimed the authorities had arrested the wrong person. Al-Shamsi's lawyer said that his defendant appeared distressed and disoriented in court with signs of intimidation and torture.[97] He was reportedly released in March 2013. Two other users were also arrested for having messaged South al-Haq after authorities reportedly hacked into the account. Only days after, five more Twitter users were arrested for expressing political criticism and support for detainees.[98]

On April 8, 2013, Abdulhamid al-Hadidi was sentenced to ten months in jail for allegedly "spreading false information" about the trial of the so-called UAE94, of which his father, Abdulrahman al-Hadidi, is a member.[99] Al-Hadidi had been active on social media by sharing news from detainees and the details of their trials. He was also pushing detainees' families to work together to demand fair and transparent trials for the accused, as well as an end to state violations against their rights to prison visits. He was charged under Article 46 of the cybercrime law and Article 265 of the penal code.

By mid-2013, this had brought the total of number of political detainees to 94, including the 68 mentioned above.[100] Many of the detainees are members of the Reform and Social Guidance Association, better known as al-Islah, which seeks political reform and a greater adherence to Islam in society. As mentioned, Islah members often engage in political debates online and seek to

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[93] David Hearst, "The UAE's bizarre, political trial of 94 activists," The Guardian, March 6, 2013, http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/mar/06/uae-trial-94-activists.
[94] "ANHRI Demands the Suspense of Al-Zumer's Trial," June 3, 2013. http://www.anhri.net/?p=77914
[95] Emirates Center for Human Rights, "Detained 19-year-old Emriati Activist Alleges Torture," May 5, 2013, http://www.echr.org.uk/?p=701.
[96] Emirates Center for Studies, "Al-Nuaimi in bad health," September 2, 2012. http://twitmail.com/email/533078805/4/false
[97] Rori Donaghy, "Torture in the United Arab Emirates," Huffington Post, September 24, 2012. http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/rori-donaghy/torture-in-the-united-ara_b_1908919.html
[98] Bill Law. "Eight online activists 'arrested in UAE'." December 19, 2012. http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-20768205
[99] "UAE: Son of defendant sentenced to 10 months in prison for reporting on 'UAE94' trial," Alkarama, April 11, 2013, http://en.alkarama.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1073:uae-son-of-defendant-sentenced-to-10-months-in-prison-for-reporting-on-uae94-trial&catid=38:communiqu&Itemid=107.
[100] "Current Political Prisoners," Emirates Centre for Human Rights, August 1, 2013, http://www.echr.org.uk/?page_id=207.

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document and disseminate information on human rights violations on social media.[101] These detainees face up to 15 years in jail for being part of an organization with intent to overthrow the government and with ties to Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood.[102] Reacting to Egypt's 2011 parliamentary elections, in which the Muslim Brotherhood gained the most seats out of any other political party, Dubai's chief of police tweeted that "since Muslim Brotherhood has 'become a state,' anyone advocating its cause [in the UAE] is considered a foreign agent."[103]

Aside from arbitrary detentions, unfair prosecutions, and torture, online activists also face a range of extralegal attacks in the UAE. In October 2012, blogger Ahmed Mansour faced media harassment and physical beatings. The actions were taken in response to a pre-recorded speech he made that was later broadcast at a side event to the United Nations Human Rights Council regarding violations in the UAE, Oman, and Saudi Arabia.[104]

The high amount of prosecutions and physical harassment of users in the UAE is, in part, due to the several obstacles they face in using ICT tools anonymously. In January 2013, the country's two mobile phone providers gave a last warning to their users to register their SIM cards or have their lines cut for failing to comply.[105] The government had required every mobile user to re-register their information as part of the TRA's "My Number, My Identity"[106] campaign launched in June 2012.[107] Cybercafe customers are also required to provide their ID and personal information in order to surf the net.[108]

Internet and mobile providers are not transparent in discussing the procedures taken by authorities to access their data and users' information. Warnings from both the Abu Dhabi and Dubai police against spreading rumors through mobile messages may indicate the government's overall surveillance on users.[109] Further proving this, as previously mentioned, Twitter users were arrested

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[101] "UAE: Unfair Mass Trial of 94 Dissidents," Alkarama, April 3, 2013, http://en.alkarama.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1070:uae-unfair-mass-trial-of-94-dissidents&catid=38:communiqu&Itemid=107.

[102] Lori Plotkin Boghardt, "Interpreting Muslim Brotherhood Verdicts in the UAE," The Washington Institute, July 1, 2013, http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/interpreting-muslim-brotherhood-verdicts-in-the-uae.

[103] Wafa Issa, "Muslim Brotherhood invading UAE social media: police chief," March 9, 2012, http://www.thenational.ae/news/uae-news/muslim-brotherhood-invading-uae-social-media-police-chief.

[104] Gulf Center for Human Rights, "UAE: Attacks and Smear Campaign against prominent human rights defender Ahmed Mansoor," October 5, 2013. http://gc4hr.org/news/view/250

[105] Nadeem Hanif. "Du and Etisalat brace for UAE users last chance to re-register Sim card." January 16, 2013. http://www.thenational.ae/news/uae-news/du-and-etisalat-brace-for-uae-users-last-chance-to-re-register-sim-card

[106] The TRA's statement reads: "Your mobile phone number is an extension of your identity. Sharing or giving away your SIM-Card to others can cause unwanted consequences, including being held accountable for any improper conduct or misuse associated with the mobile phone subscription by the authorities as well as being liable for all charges by the licensees." Telecommunications Regulatory Authority. "My Number My Identity." Accessed April 28, 2013. http://www.tra.gov.ae/mynumber.php

[107] Nadeem Hanif. "Every mobile phone user in the UAE must re-register SIM card." June 28, 2012. http://www.thenational.ae/news/uae-news/every-mobile-phone-user-in-the-uae-must-re-register-sim-card

[108] Citizen Lab. "Planet Blue Coat: Mapping Global Censorship and Surveillance Tools." January 15, 2013. https://citizenlab.org/2013/01/planet-blue-coat-mapping-global-censorship-and-surveillance-tools/

[109] 109 Abdulla Rasheed, "Misuse of instant messaging services punishable by law," Gulf News, July 26, 2011 http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/uae/crime/misuse-of-instant-messaging-services-punishable-by-law-1.843047

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for exchanging private messages with a controversial account in December 2012.[110] Incidents of providers demanding warrants or legal permissions for security bodies to gain access to user data are not known. In 2009, the makers of BlackBerry devices alleged that a software update issued by the UAE telecommunications company Etisalat was actually spyware used to "enable unauthorized access to private or confidential information stored on the user's smartphone."[111]

The UAE remains one of the top countries facing hacking attempts worldwide. The country's spam rate was recorded at 73 percent, and 46 percent of the country's social networking users fell victim to cybercrimes, compared to the global average of 39 percent.[112] In July 2012, the TRA denied claims of the hacktivist group Anonymous to "have penetrated the country's proxy server and extracted a list of blocked website addresses."[113] Anonymous has posted a list of over 24,000 words and links blocked in the UAE.[114] Also that month, a group of UAE-based hackers defaced a website of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP), apparently to warn Pakistani hackers against engaging in cyberattacks against the UAE and other Gulf countries.[115]

Emirati activists have also reported spyware and malware attacks against their computers. In one case from January 2013, a user received an e-mail purportedly containing a link to a video of the Dubai police chief. Instead, the link contained spyware that could monitor the victim's screen, enable the computer's webcam, steal passwords, and conduct keylogging. It was believed the Emirati government was behind the attack.[116]

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[110] Bill Law. "Eight online activists 'arrested in UAE'." December 19, 2012. http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-20768205

[111] Tom Arnold, "BlackBerry patch was not for spying, claims Etisalat," Arabian Business, 23 July, 2009 http://www.arabianbusiness.com/exclusive-blackberry-patch-was-not-for-spying-claims-etisalat-15618.html

[112] Arabian Gazetter, "UAE to Face Advanced Cybercrime in 2013," December 9, 2012. http://arabiangazette.com/uae-face-advanced-cybercrime-2013/

[113] Martin Croucher, "Telecoms regulator denies Anonymous hacked UAE netfilter system," The National, July 8, 2012. http://www.thenational.ae/news/uae-news/telecoms-regulator-denies-anonymous-hacked-uae-netfilter-system

[114] Anonymous, UAE list http://pastehtml.com/view/c336prjrl.rtxt

[115] Alain Hacker, "HRCP website hacked, counter-hacked By BozzErrOR & Gh()stH4x0r," February 28, 2013. http://www.alainhacker.com/2013/02/hrcp-website-hacked-counter-hacked-by.html

[116] Bill Marczak, "Hacked Website, Java Vulnerability Used to Target UAE Activist with Spyware," Bahrain Watch, January 15, 2013, https://bahrainwatch.org/blog/2013/01/15/hacked-website-java-vulnerability-used-to-target-uae-activist-with-spyware/.

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