
Social media restrictions in Saudi Arabia

Despite pro-modernization rhetorical shifts, Saudi Arabia continues to have one of the most restricted media environments in the world. Social media has provided a conduit for access to news, but it too is being suppressed as the government seeks to silence criticism of its domestic policies and its war in Yemen, even as initiatives largely spearheaded by the kingdom's deputy crown prince aim to project an image of liberalization to the west.

Throughout 2016, the government aggressively pursued legal charges against a number of high-profile journalists, writers, bloggers, and social-media activists. Several received lengthy prison sentences, while those who avoided punishment experienced sustained official harassment.

Article 39 of the 1992 Basic Law, which covers mass media, does not guarantee freedom of the press, and the authorities are given broad powers to prevent any act that may lead to disunity or sedition. The Basic Law also prohibits publishing materials that harm national security or that "detract from a man's dignity".

In addition, since 2011, all online newspapers and bloggers have been required to obtain a special license from the ministry. In practice, a variety of courts hear cases against traditional and online media outlets.

In 2011, as uprisings across the Middle East and North Africa gained momentum, the monarchy issued a decree banning the reporting of news that contradicts Sharia (Islamic law), undermines national security, promotes foreign interests, or slanders religious leaders. A number of Saudi journalists remain jailed, including blogger Raif Badawi, who was sentenced to a 10-year prison term and 1,000 lashes in 2014. In October 2016, it was reported that Badawi was set to receive a new round of lashes as a part of that sentence.

Despite the environment, nearly 74 percent of the population accessed the internet in 2016. Many Saudis have turned to the internet to express political opinions and expose government corruption. Saudi Arabia has as many as five million Twitter users, about half of whom are considered "active". Widespread discussion of a topic on Twitter often forces traditional news outlets to cover stories that would otherwise be considered too sensitive.

The government has been known to directly censor both local and international media, and journalists routinely practice self-censorship and avoid criticism of the royal family, Islam, or religious authorities.