

Jordanian government censors 304 on-line news websites

Written by Brian Whitaker

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On the same day the king promoted democracy and freedom of speech by launching Demoqrati website, the Jordanian government censored 304 news websites

{[comments on]}Jordan: active citizenship and internet censorship

Websites blocked as king "empowers" the people

Yesterday marked the official launch in Jordan of Demoqrati – King Abdullah's latest initiative to promote "democratic empowerment and active citizenship". [Describing](#) the initiative in one of his periodic discussion papers as an effort to build "political engagement across society", the king said:

"By supporting 'social entrepreneurs' to have a greater say in public affairs, Demoqrati will help expand the tools and platforms – debate forums, training programmes and others – available to all Jordanians to enable them to be active and engaged citizens.

"Demoqrati will initially focus on efforts to increase transparency, provide new ways for Jordanians to discuss and debate critical issues facing the country, and seek to harness the talents and creativity of all Jordanians in the service of society."

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How unfortunate, then, that yesterday also marked the start of another initiative – to shackle the social entrepreneurs that King Abdullah appeared to be talking about. Orders went out for internet service providers, as a matter of urgency, to block several hundred Jordanian websites.

On Saturday, Fayez Shawabkeh, head of the government's Press and Publications Department sent a letter to the head of the Telecommunications Regulatory Commission:

"Based on article (49), paragraph (G) of the Press and Publication Law No. 8 for the year 1998 and its amendments, I have decided to block the news websites in the attached list as of date. Kindly review and take the necessary measures to implement."

Yesterday, the Telecommunications Regulatory Commission swung into action with a letter to internet service providers headed "very urgent":

"Reference to the Press and Publication Department memo no. MN 17/1360 dated June 1, 2013, a copy of which is attached [...], and based on the provisions of article 3.1.2 of the licensing agreement of your company, and based on the blocking decision by the director of the Press and Publication Department in this regard, the [Telecommunications Regulatory] Commission directs you to do what is required to block the websites listed in the attached document and prevent your subscribers from accessing them before the end of today, June 2, 2013. Note that if the websites that don't have a URL in the list, you will be provided with it later."

The list attached to the letter [names 304 websites](#) .

The move was not entirely unexpected, though it's unclear why the authorities have decided to implement it now – and to give ISPs only 24 hours' notice.

In 2010, the Court of Cassation ruled that websites could be classified as "publications" and were therefore subject to penalties under the kingdom's highly controversial Press and Publications Law for anything that might "be deemed offensive or imply criticism of the government, national unity or the economy".

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A few months later, the government blocked public sector workers from accessing 48 popular websites in their offices. This was said to be because they were spending [too much of their working time browsing the internet](#).

Last September, in line with the earlier court ruling, the Press and Publications Law was amended so that online "news" sites would require a licence (as already happens with printed media). One of the other stipulations was that these websites must appoint an editor-in-chief who had been a member of the Jordan Press Association for at least four years.

They were given until [last January](#) to comply or faced being blocked – which is what is happening now.

Writing for Foreign Policy last year, Naseem Tarawnah of the [Black Iris blog](#) [explained](#) :

"Successive governments have consistently accused Jordanian news sites of practising irresponsible journalism, publishing slanderous articles, and partaking in character assassinations as well as blackmail. However, for the average Jordanian internet user, such sites represent a vital resource of fairly unfiltered, local breaking news, as well as a platform for discussion, which may help explain the antagonistic relationship between the state and the budding, unregulated sector."

Most of the time, Jordan's law-abiding, licensed, print media does not provide anything like the type of coverage needed to stimulate the sort of open debate that King Abdullah claims to be advocating.

In a recent survey by the [Centre for Defending Freedom of Journalists](#) (CDFJ), 86% of Jordanian journalists said they practise self-censorship – which almost all of them blamed on the authorities' attempts to influence their work.

"It was believed that the so-called Arab Spring might boost freedom of the media, but despite the minor difference it made, the revolts did not have the widespread effect we were hoping for," CDFJ president Nidal Mansour told [the Jordan Times](#) .

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He added that the authorities *“treated the media as their opponents and continuously interfered with them, violating the freedom of journalists and preventing them from reporting freely and independently”*.