

United Arab Emirates

	2013	2014		
Internet Freedom Status	Not Free	Not Free	Population:	9.3 million
Obstacles to Access (0-25)	13	14	Internet Penetration 2013:	88 percent
Limits on Content (0-35)	22	22	Social Media/ICT Apps Blocked:	Yes
Violations of User Rights (0-40)	31	31	Political/Social Content Blocked:	Yes
TOTAL* (0-100)	66	67	Bloggers/ICT Users Arrested:	Yes
			Press Freedom 2014 Status:	Not Free

* 0=most free, 100=least free

Key Developments: May 2013 – May 2014

- The state continued to block certain political and social websites, including foreign websites that are viewed as sympathetic to the Muslim Brotherhood (see **Limits on Content**).
- In July 2013, Dubai police arrested a 22-year-old Indian migrant worker for uploading a video to YouTube showing an Emirati man assaulting an Indian bus driver after a car accident. If convicted, the YouTube user faces a harsher punishment than that which could be doled out to the alleged assaulter (see **Violations of User Rights**).
- As part of the “UAE94” trial involving prisoners of conscience, five Emiratis were sentenced to prison terms of 7 to 10 years for their online activities. In total, 69 out of the 94 political detainees were sentenced on numerous charges (see **Violations of User Rights**).
- A handful of bloggers and Twitter users who spoke out online against the treatment of the “UAE94” prisoners of conscience have since been arrested for their comments, with four users handed sentences of two to five years (see **Violations of User Rights**).
- Shezanne Cassim, an American citizen detained in April 2013 for producing a YouTube parody video on Emirati youth culture, was released in January along with others involved in the video (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 However, while remaining open 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 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.

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

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 social 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.

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. However, for the most part, these efforts have not been tolerated by the authorities, who have responded with numerous arrests and lengthy jail sentences handed to internet users. In July 2013, 69 Emiratis were sentenced as a part of the unfair trial of 94 political detainees, known as the "UAE94." Five of the detainees—Khalifa al-Nuaimi, Rashid al-Shamsi, Musabeh al-Rumaity, Abdullah ala-Hajri, and Omran al-Radhwan—were given prison sentences of 7 to 10 years for their online activities. Many others were arrested and imprisoned over the coverage period for commenting on the UAE94 trial, uploading footage of human rights violations, or producing satirical videos on YouTube. These cases demonstrate authorities' zero tolerance for government criticism, including through comedy, in an environment where internet users continue to face many challenges to freedom of expression online.

1 "Internet in UAE," International Telecommunication Union, 2001, accessed June 25, 2013, <http://www.itu.int/arabinternet2001/documents/pdf/document25.pdf>.

Obstacles to Access

Similarly to other Gulf States, Emirati users enjoy a robust ICT infrastructure and high connection speeds. The number of internet users has risen rapidly: the ITU measured the internet penetration rate at 88 percent by the end of 2013, compared to 63 percent in 2008.² As of May 2014, there were 1.08 million internet subscribers, 99.9 percent of whom had broadband connections.³ 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.⁴ The ITU's Measuring the Information Society (MIS) 2013 report ranked the UAE 33rd in the world.⁵

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 (US\$2,178) a year. However, the UAE ranks 29 in the ITU's 2012 ICT Price Basket Index, in which local broadband prices are measured against gross national income (GNI) per capita.⁶ 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 years⁷ and, in May 2012, the telecommunications company Etisalat announced a further 50 percent cut in broadband subscription costs.⁸ In August 2013, the telecommunications company "du" was criticized for its plans to automatically upgrade customers on the most basic package, which costs AED 199 (US\$54) per month, to one costing AED 275 (\$74) per month.⁹

The UAE has one of the highest mobile phone penetration rates in the region at nearly 172 percent, or 16 million subscribers, by the end of 2013.¹⁰ In 2013, a report by the Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (TRA) ranked the country first in the world for smartphone penetration, with 73.8 percent of consumers owning smartphones. According to the same report, the overall mobile penetration rate in the country stands at 181 percent.¹¹

2 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>.

3 Telecommunications Regulatory Authority. "Latest Statistics." Accessed November 2, 2014. <http://www.tra.gov.ae/latest-statistics.php>

4 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>.

5 "UAE made remarkable achievements in 2013," Zawya, December 26, 2013. http://www.zawya.com/story/UAE_made_remarkable_achievements_in_2013-GN_26122013_271212/.

6 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.

7 Ben Flanagan. "UAE subscribers paying high price for broadband." Aug 16, 2011 <http://www.thenational.ae/business/technology/uae-subscribers-paying-high-price-for-broadband>.

8 "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>.

9 Kyle Sinclair. "UAE telecom users outraged by 'du'opoly' as bills hiked," The National, August 7, 2013. <http://www.thenational.ae/business/telecoms/uae-telecom-users-outraged-by-duopoly-as-bills-hiked>.

10 International 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>.

11 Aarti Nagraj. "Apple's iPhone 5 Is UAE's Most Popular Smartphone – TRA," Gulf Business, December 22, 2013. <http://gulfbusiness.com/2013/12/apples-iphone-5-is-uaes-most-popular-smartphone-tra/#.UtWyimRDt8wTelecommunication>.

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.¹² In 2006, the country decided to include computer labs in public schools, thereby seeking to improve computer literacy among the youth.¹³ In a review of its 2013 achievements, the UAE's Ministry of Education stated that all of its curricula were made available at Apple's "App Store," allowing students to view schoolbooks on an iPad. The ministry has also initiated the *Durusi* project with Etisalat and Google, turning school lessons for grades 11 and 12 into videos. With school infrastructure using state-of-the-art technology and tools, UAE schools are now among the top 25 worldwide for online connectivity. Among many things, "Mohammed bin Rashid Smart Learning Program" educational reform program equips teachers and students with tablet computers.¹⁴ There are now 123 smart-learning schools, compared with only 14 in 2012. The ministry has also completed the e-content project in both English and Arabic. Principals are enrolled in international computer literacy training programs.¹⁵

The two 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 November 2013, Du issued a statement that damage to submarine cables affected internet bandwidth.¹⁷ 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.¹⁸ Du suffered similar disruptions in April 2010 and March 2011 due to cuts to the SEA-ME-WE 4 cable.¹⁹ 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.²⁰

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,²¹ while a majority of Du is owned by various state companies.²² 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.

12 UNICEF. "United Arab Emirates: Statistics." Accessed at June 25, 2013. <http://uni.cf/lxga0>.

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

14 Roberta Pennington, "Smart Learning Programme transforms education in UAE's government schools," The National, January 13, 2014, <http://www.thenational.ae/uae/education/smart-learning-programme-transforms-education-in-uaes-government-schools>.

15 The National staff. "2013 a banner year in UAE education," The National, January 1, 2014. <http://www.thenational.ae/uae/education/2013-a-banner-year-in-uae-education>.

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

17 Abbas Jafar Ali. "Internet speed in UAE effected as du reports cable cut," tbreak, November 14, 2013. <http://www.tbreak.ae/news/internet-speed-uae-effected-du-reports-cable-cut>.

18 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>.

19 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>.

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

21 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>.

22 Du, "Shareholders structure," accessed June 7, 2013, <http://www.du.ae/en/about/corporate-governance/shareholders>.

Providers fall under the laws and regulations set by the Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (TRA), which has been headed by Mohamed Nasser Al Ghanim since its establishment in 2004. The TRA's tasks include licensing, conducting surveys, promoting investment, and assigning websites to the ".ae" top-level country domain.²³

Limits on Content

Online censorship has increased in the UAE following the regional 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 are not respected.

The TRA instructs ISPs to block content related to terrorism, pornography, and gambling, as well as websites that contain political speech threatening to the ruling order. In November 2013, a report by CitizenLab found that a number of websites have been misidentified as containing nudity or pornographic content by the filtering tools SmartFilter (used by Etisalat) and NetSweeper (used by Du), resulting in their blocking in the UAE.²⁴ Additionally, a January 2013 report found five installations of Blue Coat ProxySG—which contains a web filtering system—in the country's network, linked to Etisalat.²⁵

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 500 search terms.²⁶ For example, some parts of Flickr are still blocked in the UAE, including the "advanced search" function.²⁷ Users reported that the search results page is blocked on YouTube when searching "Chicken Breast"²⁸ or "Like a Virgin."²⁹ A number of Twitter users called on their followers to get Tumblr unblocked by filling out an online form for both providers.³⁰

23 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.

24 Bennett. "Smartfilter: Miscategorization and Filtering in Saudi Arabia and UAE," CitizenLab, November 28, 2013. <https://citizenlab.org/2013/11/smartfilter-miscategorization-filtering-saudi-arabia-uae/>

25 "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/>.

26 Reporters Borders. "Countries Under Surveillance: United Arab Emirates," accessed in June 25, 2013, <http://en.rsrf.org/surveillance-united-arab-emirates.39760.html>.

27 See, for example, <https://twitter.com/nraford/status/340020487033864192>.

28 See https://twitter.com/_eM_J/status/218282557853274112Without.

29 See <https://twitter.com/hghareeb/status/175634654920048640>.

30 See <https://twitter.com/DemetriasLooch/status/375423348261408769>.

According to Herdict, the crowdsourcing tool that lets users report blocked content, internet users from the UAE have reported several social, political, LGBTQ, dating, and proxy sites blocked in their country.³¹ Skype's download page and online forum continue to be blocked, alongside several proxy websites. In April 2014, Etisalat explained over Twitter that Skype can only be used over Wi-Fi.³² Pages of political significance, such as the Arab-American news website *Arab Times*, the blog of an atheist Emirati man "Ben Kerishan," and the anonymous *Secret Dubai* blog, continue to be blocked. In January 2014 alone, Twitter users have reported the blocking of ProxTube, a site that unblocks censored YouTube content,³³ as well as the chatting website Omelga³⁴ and the image-based social network "We Heart It."³⁵

The website "Cairo Portal" reported being blocked in the UAE, along with other unnamed Egyptian websites, following their critical reports of the country's support for the military leadership in Egypt.³⁶ Authorities continue to ban inactive sites such as the political forum "UAE Hewar" and the blogs "Secret Dubai Diary"³⁷ and "UAE Torture."³⁸ The latter posted a 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.³⁹ A request to unblock UAE Hewar was rejected by the Federal Supreme Court in July 2012,⁴⁰ and its Facebook page is also blocked due to its criticism of the regime and state corruption.⁴¹ 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.⁴²

The Lebanese queer and feminist e-magazine *Bekhsoos*⁴³ and the U.S.-based Arab Lesbian e-magazine *Bint El Nas* are both blocked.⁴⁴ Many websites displaying religious content are blocked, including an Arab Christian online forum named The Church Network.⁴⁵ In the past three years,

31 Herdict. Quick Stats: United Arab Emirates. Accessed January 14, 2014. <http://www.herdirect.org/explore/indepth?fc=AE>.

32 See https://twitter.com/Etisalat_Care/status/458500146574024704.

33 See https://twitter.com/DrCool_/status/422249741066313728.

34 See <https://twitter.com/f9maa/status/423093816800067584>.

35 See <https://twitter.com/RominaChiara/status/423008993724751874>.

36 "The UAE Blocks Cairo Portal and Other Egyptian Websites." February 20, 2014. <http://www.cairoportal.com/global-journalism/11435>.

37 See <http://secretdubai.blogspot.com/>.

38 See <http://www.uaetorture.com/>.

39 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/>.

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

41 Reporters Without Borders. "Countries Under Surveillance: United Arab Emirates." March 11, 2011. <http://en.rsf.org/united-arab-emirates-united-arab-emirates-11-03-2011,39760.html>.

42 "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.

43 See <http://www.bekhsoos.com/web/>.

44 See <http://www.bintelnas.org/>.

45 See <http://www.arabchurch.com/>.

political content has been the focus of state censorship. Examples include the secular pan-Arab online forum “Modern Discussion,”⁴⁶ and the California-based Arabic online newspaper *Watan*, all blocked in September 2012.⁴⁷ A website disseminating news of the trial of 94 Emirati political detainees was also blocked in 2013.⁴⁸ The anonymous websites “UAE University Watch”⁴⁹ and “UAE Prison,” which exposes violations against jailed expatriates, have both been blocked.⁵⁰ *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.⁵¹

The availability of Voice-over-Internet-Protocol (VoIP) services in the UAE has been shrouded in doubt and disputes between the country’s two telecommunications companies and the TRA. In the past, many aspects of VoIP applications were blocked by ISPs, and Skype was classified by the TRA as an “unlicensed VoIP.” However, on March 19, 2013, 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.⁵² After initial reports from the TRA indicated that Skype users could still face fines of AED 1 million (US\$272,000) or two years imprisonment, the regulatory body denied that it had made these statements and reiterated that Skype was still an “unauthorized service.”⁵³

Before these events, a notice appeared on the Skype home page stating, “Access to this site is currently blocked. The site falls under the Prohibited Content Categories of the UAE’s Internet Access Management Policy.”⁵⁴ Similar products such as Viber or Apple’s Facetime were also banned;⁵⁵ in fact, Apple agreed to sell its iPhone4 products to UAE mobile phone companies without the Facetime application preinstalled.⁵⁶ Users in the UAE reported that Viber and Facetime are accessible over Wi-Fi, though only if the applications are downloaded outside of the country.

Two weeks after launching Blackberry’s “BBM Channels” social media service in November 2013, the country’s two companies stopped the service in response to guidelines from the Telecommunications Regulatory Authority.⁵⁷ In January 2014, the VoIP service “Vippie by Voipswitch” tweeted that they were blocked in the Emirates.⁵⁸ Despite these limitations, circumvention software

46 See <http://www.ahewar.org/>.

47 ANHRI. “Kuwait: News website blocked.” March 22, 2012. <http://beta1.anhri.net/en/?p=7521>.

48 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>.

49 See <http://www.uaeuniversitywatch.net/>.

50 See <http://uaeprison.com/>.

51 See <http://www.emaratybedoon.blogspot.com/>.

52 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>.

53 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>.

54 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>.

55 “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>.

56 Reporters Without Borders. “Countries Under Surveillance: United Arab Emirates.” March 11, 2011. <http://en.rsf.org/united-arab-emirates-united-arab-emirates-11-03-2011.39760.html>.

57 “BlackBerry blow: Etisalat and du pull plug on new BBM services in UAE,” The National, December 10, 2013. <http://www.thenational.ae/business/industry-insights/telecoms/blackberry-blow-etisalat-and-du-pull-plug-on-new-bbm-services-in-uae>.

58 See https://twitter.com/Vippie_/status/423058434947178496.

and proxies are commonly used by Emiratis to access blocked content⁵⁹ and VoIP services.⁶⁰ BlackBerry services have been restricted since 2010, when the government introduced a regulation allowing only companies with more than 20 BlackBerry accounts to access the encrypted BlackBerry Messenger service.⁶¹ On numerous occasions the TRA has emphasized that it is up to 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.

Intermediaries do face possible charges for content posted or appearing on their websites. Under the 2012 cybercrime law, website owners and employees “may be held liable” for any violations occurring on their sites, including defamation charges.⁶² In May 2012, Dubai police 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.⁶³ 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 the president’s two sons.⁶⁴

Decisions to block or remove online content often lack procedural transparency or judicial oversight. On its website, the telecommunications company Du details what criteria it uses to block websites. 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.⁶⁵

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.⁶⁶ 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.⁶⁷ Etisalat and “du” have responded to Twitter users about unblocking inquiries by asking them to fill out certain online forms, yet there is no information on whether the bans were lifted.⁶⁸

59 Stuart Turton, “Dubai’s dubious internet censorship,” September 6, 2010, <http://www.pcpro.co.uk/blogs/2010/09/06/dubais-dubious-internet-censorship/>.

60 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>.

61 “Use of Most Secure BlackBerry System Restricted, Blogger Arrested,” Reporters Without Borders, April 28, 2011, <http://en.rsrf.org/united-arab-emirates-use-of-most-secure-blackberry-28-04-2011,40123.html>.

62 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>.

63 Sara Gates, “Dubai Police Shut Down 15 Facebook and Twitter Accounts Involved in Defamation and Abuse,” Huffington Post, May 21, 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/05/21/dubai-facebook-twitter-accounts-shut-down_n_1533633.html.

64 Reporters Without Borders, “Newspaper Suspended for 20 Days Over story Race Horse,” July 7, 2009, <http://en.rsrf.org/united-arab-emirates-newspaper-suspended-for-20-days-07-07-2009,33730>.

65 Du, “Prohibited Content Categories,” July 29, 2008, <http://www.du.ae/Documents/Annex%201-IAM%20Regulatory%20Policy%20Over%201%200%2029July2008.pdf>.

66 Etisalat, “Blocking and Unblocking Internet Content,” Accessed on April 28, 2013, <http://www.etisalat.ae/eportal/en/corporate/blocking-unblocking.html>.

67 Piers Grimley, “Etisalat doesn’t block websites,” Gulf News, July 21, 2005, <http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/uae/media/etisalat-doesn-t-block-websites-1.294723>.

68 See https://twitter.com/Etisalat_Care/status/417654518768074753 and <https://twitter.com/dutweets/status/414787641620430848Evans>.

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. The overall press freedom environment in traditional media is dire, with foreign journalists and academics often denied entry or deported for expressing their views on political topics.⁶⁹ 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 harassing and intimidating political dissidents and their families online.

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.⁷⁰ 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.⁷¹

Social media use has increased in recent years, in line with regional trends. Facebook recently hit 3.6 million users in the UAE, representing a penetration of 61 percent.⁷² By the end of 2013, 6.2 percent of internet users in the UAE had active Twitter accounts.⁷³ 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. Families of political prisoners still 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,⁷⁴ the wife of detained blogger Rashid al-Shamsi, and Aysha al-Thufiri, the daughter of detainee Salih al-Thufiri.⁷⁵

69 See for example, “Egyptian journalist freed from UAE detention,” Aljazeera, August 4th, 2013, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2013/08/2013846293057501.html>, and “Palestinian journalist detained at a secret prison in the UAE,” Middle East Monitor, December 4, 2013, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/news/middle-east/8654-palestinian-journalist-detained-at-a-secret-prison-in-the-uae>.

70 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>.

71 See <https://twitter.com/ECHRIGHTS/status/230334658129321985>.

72 “The UAE’s social media statistics & trends, updated hourly,” accessed on January 14, 2013. <http://www.stats.ae/UAE-Facebook-Stats>.

73 “The UAE’s social media statistics & trends, updated hourly,” accessed on January 14, 2013. <http://www.stats.ae/UAE-Twitter-Stats>.

74 See <https://twitter.com/MariamMansori>.

75 See https://twitter.com/Aysha_75.

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 2013 and early 2014, with at least five users sentenced to prison for three to five years.

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."⁷⁶ However, the judicial system in the Emirates lacks independence and prosecutions are often pursued for political reasons.⁷⁷ In 2012, the president of the UAE appointed himself as head of the judiciary, overtaking the position of the minister of justice.⁷⁸ 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.⁷⁹ Furthermore, former detainees who have since been pardoned⁸⁰ are continually harassed and do not enjoy their full rights as citizens.⁸¹

Articles 8 and 176 of the penal code are used to punish public "insults" of the country's top officials, although these provisions are widely used to prosecute any users who express a desire for political reform.⁸² Articles 70 and 71 of the 1980 publishing law prohibit criticism of the head of the state and of Islam or any other religion.⁸³ 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 (US\$5,444).⁸⁴ 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.⁸⁵ In July 2011, Abu Dhabi police warned that spreading

76 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>.

77 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>.

78 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>.

79 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.

80 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>.

81 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/>.

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

83 "Publications and Publishing Law 1980," accessed in June 25, 2013, <http://nmc.gov.ae/en/MediaLawsAndRegulation/4.pdf>

84 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>.

85 Reporters Without Borders. "Countries Under Surveillance: United Arab Emirates." March 11, 2011. <http://en.rsf.org/united-arab-emirates-united-arab-emirates-11-03-2011.39760.html>.

rumors through text messages constitutes libel and can be punishable by up to three years in jail.⁸⁶ In April 2012, a spokesperson for the Ministry of Interior Affairs stated on a local TV channel that the ministry has “electronic patrols” tracking all “topics and materials written and shared on social networks.” He added, “Anything [in] violation of the law at these web sites will be considered as abuse and will be punishable as in the real world.”⁸⁷

A new cybercrime law was issued in November 2012, replacing an earlier decree from 2006 that was criticized for being too vague.⁸⁸ 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 or prejudice the public order and public morals.”⁸⁹ 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.⁹⁰

Authorities regularly make use of these laws to prosecute Emirati citizens and residents for their online activities. In July 2013, Dubai police arrested a 22-year-old Indian migrant worker for uploading a video showing an Emirati man assaulting an Indian bus driver after a car accident. The assaulter’s son submitted a complaint to the police against the person who has uploaded the video for “defamation.” Dubai Police confirmed the arrest and clarified that the uploader should have submitted the video to them instead of sharing it, which violates the privacy of the assaulter.⁹¹ According to *Arabian Business*, the man who uploaded the video now faces up to two years in jail for defamation, while the assaulter, a senior Emirati official, faces only a year in jail or a maximum fine of AED 10,000 (US\$2,700) for minor assault.⁹² In November 2013, a spokesperson from the ministry of interior said people who upload photos of others without their permission could face a minimum prison sentence of six months and/or a fine of up to AED 500,000 (US\$136,000).⁹³ Foreigners and homosexuals also face targeting by the authorities. In June 2013, a gay man from Kenya was

86 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>.

87 Mohammed Al Sadafy, “Dubai Police monitoring social networking sites round the clock,” Emirates 24/7, April 4, 2012. <http://www.emirates247.com/news/emirates/dubai-police-monitoring-social-networking-sites-round-the-clock-2012-04-04-1.452143>.

88 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>.

89 See Federal Decree-Law no. (5) of 2012 on Combating Cybercrimes, August 13, 2012, available online at: http://ejjustice.gov.ae/downloads/latest_laws/cybercrimes_5_2012_en.pdf.

90 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>.

91 “Dubai arrests man for sharing assault video,” Aljazeera, July 18, 2013. <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2013/07/201371831928550809.html>.

92 Shane McGinley, “Dubai police arrest ‘shock video’ uploader,” Arabian Business, July 18, 2013, <http://www.arabianbusiness.com/dubai-police-arrest-shock-video-uploader-509622.html>.

93 “Facebook users risk jail or fine for uploading images - UAE official,” Arabian Business, November 4, 2013. <http://m.arabianbusiness.com/facebook-users-risk-jail-fine-for-uploading-images-uae-official-525068.html>.

reportedly entrapped by Dubai police after they contacted him through a gay-dating website.⁹⁴ There was little information to confirm or follow-up on the arrest. Under UAE law, foreigners can be imprisoned or deported for violating the moral code.

In a case that made international headlines, Shezanne Cassim, a Sri Lankan-born American citizen living in the Emirates, was arrested in April 2013 for creating and uploading a parody video of youth culture in the UAE. The video, posted in October 2012, included a clear warning, stating, "The following events are fictional and no offence was intended to the people of Satwa and UAE." Cassim spent five months in jail before he was formally charged with "defaming the image of UAE society abroad."⁹⁵ In December 2013, Cassim and two Indian men were sentenced to one year in jail and a fine of AED 10,000 (US\$2,723). A Canadian woman, a British woman, and an American man were given the same sentence in absentia. Two Emirati brothers involved in producing the video were given eight months in jail and a fine of AED 5,000 (US\$1,360), while a third was pardoned.⁹⁶ In December 2013, an Emirati named Obaid al-Zaabi was arrested immediately after appearing on CNN to discuss the case of Cassim, with whom he had shared a prison cell. Al-Zaabi had been previously arrested in July 2013 for his pro-reform and human rights views on Twitter.⁹⁷ In January 2014, Cassim and others detained with him were released. He was deported to the United States.⁹⁸

The key development over the past coverage period was the July 2013 sentencing of 69 political prisoners as part of a mass trial of 94 citizens, known as the "UAE94" trial. Twenty-five citizens were acquitted. Many of the detainees that make up the UAE94 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, al-Islah members often engage in political debates online and seek to document and disseminate information on human rights violations on social media.⁹⁹ These detainees were given jail sentences of 7-15 years for being part of an organization with intent to overthrow the government and with ties to Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood.¹⁰⁰ Reacting to Egypt's 2011 parliamentary elections, in which the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party gained more seats than 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."¹⁰¹

94 Colin Stewart. "Dubai: Police entrap, arrest gay Kenyan," Erasing 76 Crimes, June 3, 2013. <http://76crimes.com/2013/06/03/dubai-police-entrap-arrest-gay-kenyan/>.

95 Haneen Dajani, "Makers of spoof video on YouTube that harmed UAE's public image sentenced to jail," The National, December 23, 2013, <http://www.thenational.ae/uae/courts/makers-of-spoof-video-on-youtube-that-harmed-uaes-public-image-sentenced-to-jail>.

96 "UAE court convicts eight over 'spoof documentary video,'" BBC, December 23, 2013. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-25495256>.

97 "Emirati arrested after CNN appearance," Emirates Center for Human Rights, December 18, 2013. <http://www.echr.org.uk/?p=1093>.

98 Forrest, Steve. "Shezanne Cassim, freed from UAE prison, returns to U.S." CNN. January 9, 2014. <http://www.cnn.com/2014/01/09/world/meast/uae-freed-american/>.

99 "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.

100 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>.

101 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>.

Among those sentenced in July 2013 were blogger Khalifa Al-Nuaimi¹⁰² and Twitter users Rashid al-Shamsi¹⁰³ and Musabeh al-Rumaithy,¹⁰⁴ three individuals arrested for their online activities and sentenced to 10 years imprisonment.¹⁰⁵ Blogger Abdullah al-Hajri¹⁰⁶ and Twitter user Omran al-Radhwan¹⁰⁷ were also sentenced to seven years.¹⁰⁸

The authorities also target social media users for posting content that exposes human rights abuses or criticizes government practices, particularly their handling of cases related to political detainees and prisoners of conscience such as those in the UAE94 trial. Two family members of UAE94 prisoners were arrested in July 2013, immediately after their sentencing, for social media posts calling for Emiratis to break the silence surrounding the mass trial and to call for political reform.¹⁰⁹ In September, al-Islah member Khalid Suweidi was reportedly detained after tweeting his support for members of the UAE94 trial.¹¹⁰

Osama al-Najjar was arrested in March 2014 for Twitter posts in which he expressed support for his imprisoned father, Husain al-Najjar, a member of the UAE94.¹¹¹ Security forces, lacking a warrant, raided his house and confiscated his electronic devices. In the last tweet before his arrest, he defended his father in a rhetorical response to a radio address from the ruler of Sharjah.¹¹² His first hearing was not held until September 2014, when he was able to meet with a lawyer for the first time since his arrest. He faces charges of “designing and running a website on social networks with the aim of publishing inaccurate, satirical and defamatory ideas and information that are harmful to the structure of State institutions,” as well as with “contacting foreign organizations” to spread false information and belonging to al-Islah.¹¹³

These arrests are particularly problematic given the high number of long prison sentences that have been doled out for similar online activities. Twitter user Waleed al-Shehhi was sentenced to two years imprisonment and handed a fine of AED 500,000 (US\$136,000) in November 2013 under

102 Al-Nuaimi had previously written about “the UAE 5” and had been consistently threatened prior to his arrest. See <https://kalnuaimi.wordpress.com/>.

103 Al-Shamsi had tweeted news of arrests and written blog posts related to politics and free speech See <http://rashedalshamsi.blogspot.fr/>.

104 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. See “Another Emirati activist banned from Travel,” Watan, June 28, 2012. <http://bit.ly/19bVIBW>.

105 “Current political prisoners,” Emirates Centre for Human Rights, accessed March 18, 2014, http://www.echr.org.uk/?page_id=207.

106 Al-Hajri was arrested over the contents of his blog, <http://alhajria.wordpress.com>, in which he called for more government action to combat public immorality.

107 Al-Radhwan had tweeted about “the UAE 5” detainees and wrote several posts on his website, <http://omran83.tumblr.com>, promoting Islah and criticizing state violations of Shariah law.

108 Amnesty International, “UAE: Grossly unfair trial of government critics,” July 2, 2013. <http://www.amnesty.org/en/news/uae-critics-sentenced-2013-07-02>.

109 “ANHRI calls on the UAE to reveal details about two detainees,” O News Agency, July 2013, <http://onaeg.com/?p=1053584>.

110 Activist Arrested in the UAE: Crackdown Continues Against al-Islah,” Emirates Centre for Human Rights, September 30, 2013, <http://www.echr.org.uk/?p=888>.

111 “Emirati arrested by UAE security services for Twitter comments,” Emirates Centre for Human Rights, March 18, 2014, <http://www.echr.org.uk/?p=1217>.

112 See https://twitter.com/O_Hussain_/status/445271293764833280.

113 “Urgent Action: UAE Twitter activist’s unfair trial continues,” Amnesty USA, October 8, 2014, http://www.amnestyusa.org/sites/default/files/uaa06114_1.pdf.

Articles 28 and 29 of the cybercrime law, which provide punishments for “endangering state security” and “harming the reputation of the state.”¹¹⁴ He was arrested in May 2013 for his open support of political detainees.¹¹⁵

In March 2014, 35-year-old businessman Khalifa Rabeiah¹¹⁶ and 40-year-old Etisalat engineer Othman al-Shehhi¹¹⁷ were sentenced to five years in jail and given a fine of AED 500,000 (US\$136,000). The two were convicted of violating Articles 24 and 41 of the cybercrime law, which criminalize the use of the internet to “damage national unity or social peace.” Rabeiah and al-Shehhi, both members of al-Islah, had been arrested in July 2013 for Twitter posts that were critical of judiciary procedures relating to political detainees. The two men were reportedly detained in an unknown location for six months, tortured, and denied the right to legal aid.¹¹⁸

In December 2013, 19-year-old blogger Mohammed Salem al-Zumer was sentenced to three years in jail and given a fine of AED 500,000 (US\$136,000) for “insulting the country’s leaders” and “defaming the security apparatus” through his Twitter and YouTube accounts.¹¹⁹ He had been arrested in December 2012¹²⁰ after accusing Emirati authorities of torturing detainees (such as his uncle, Khaled al-Nuaimi)¹²¹ and of hiring Blackwater, a private security company, to harass protesters.¹²² According to his mother,¹²³ the blogger has been held in solitary confinement, tortured, and pressured into making a confession stating that Khalifa al-Nuaimi, another UAE94 defendant, had encouraged him to edit and upload the videos.¹²⁴

Abdulrahman Omar Bajubair was sentenced to five years in absentia in December 2013 for defaming the judiciary over his coverage of the UAE94 trial. He is currently based in Qatar.¹²⁵ The Arabic Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI) and the Gulf Center for Human Rights reported he was targeted for running the blog-campaign *Motadaminoon* in solidarity with prisoners,¹²⁶ while the Emirates Centre for Human Rights added that he was specifically targeted for what he was posting

114 “Emirati activist sentenced to 2 years in prison for tweets,” Emirates Centre for Human Rights, November 18, 2013, <http://www.echr.org.uk/?p=1040>.

115 “UAE- Human rights defender Waleed Al-Shehhi arrested as trial of UAE 94 continues,” Gulf Center for Human Rights, May 13, 2013. <http://gc4hr.org/news/view/414>

116 Twitter profile <https://twitter.com/binrabeiah>.

117 Twitter profile <https://twitter.com/OthmanAlShehhi>.

118 “Emiratis jailed for ‘insulting’ state security on Twitter,” Emirates Centre for Human Rights, March 11, 2014, <http://www.echr.org.uk/?p=1210>.

119 His YouTube account, “Islamway11000,” has been closed. Reporters Without Borders, “Enemies of the Internet: United Arab Emirates,” March 11, 2014, <http://12mars.rsf.org/2014-en/2014/03/11/united-arab-emirates-tracking-cyber-criminals/>.

120 BBC. “UAE authorities ‘detain 18-year-old blogger.’” 7 December 2012. <http://bbc.in/VPHeYP>

121 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>.

122 ANHRI. “Two Emirati online activists sentenced to jail under recent cybercrimes law,” Ifex, January 3, 2014. http://www.ifex.org/united_arab_emirates/2014/01/03/online_activists_jailed/

123 “ANHRI Demands the Suspense of Al-Zumer’s Trial,” June 3, 2013. <http://www.anhri.net/?p=77914>

124 Emirates Center for Human Rights, “Detained 19-year-old Emirati Activist Alleges Torture,” May 5, 2013, <http://www.echr.org.uk/?p=701>.

125 “United Arab Emirates: Tracking ‘cyber-criminals,’” Reporters Without Borders, March 11, 2014, <http://12mars.rsf.org/2014-en/2014/03/11/united-arab-emirates-tracking-cyber-criminals/#more-36>.

126 GCHR. “UAE- Human rights defender Mohammed Salim Al-Zumer sentenced to 3 years in prison.” December 27, 2013. <http://gc4hr.org/news/view/567>.

through the blog's Twitter account as well as the account "@intihakat," which reports on violations against political detainees.¹²⁷

Arrested in March, Abdulhamid al-Hadidi was sentenced in April to ten months in jail under Article 46 of the cybercrime law and Article 265 of the penal code for allegedly "spreading false information" about the trial of the so-called UAE94, of which his father, Abdulrahman al-Hadidi, is a member.¹²⁸ Al-Hadidi had been active on social media by sharing news from detainees and 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. Al-Hadidi was released from prison in November 2013.¹²⁹

In addition to 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.¹³⁰

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 service discontinued for failing to comply.¹³¹ The government had required every mobile user to re-register their information as part of the TRA's "My Number, My Identity"¹³² campaign launched in June 2012.¹³³ Cybercafe customers are also required to provide their ID and personal information in order to surf the net.¹³⁴

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 of ICT users.¹³⁵ Further, Twitter users have been arrested for exchanging private

127 ECHR. "19-year-old Emirati activist jailed for tweets." December 25, 2013. <http://www.echr.org.uk/?p=1104>.

128 "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.

129 "Emirati jailed for twitter comments is freed as others face prison," Emirates Centre for Human Rights, , November 3, 2013, <http://www.echr.org.uk/?p=1001>.

130 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>.

131 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>.

132 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>.

133 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>.

134 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/>.

135 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>.

messages with a controversial account.¹³⁶ 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.¹³⁷ He was reportedly released in March 2013. Two other users were also arrested for having messaged Sout al-Haq after authorities reportedly hacked into the account. Only days later, five more Twitter users were arrested for expressing political criticism and support for detainees.¹³⁸ No reports followed their arrests or disclosed further details on their cases.

Incidents of providers demanding warrants or legal permission 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."¹³⁹

The UAE remains one of the top countries facing hacking attempts worldwide. In September 2013, Abu Dhabi Police warned businesses "of a surge in attacks by international hackers" and advised them to use necessary software for protection and to restrain from using personal emails for work communication.¹⁴⁰ The TRA has also announced new measures to block spam emails and SMS.¹⁴¹ Six hackers were arrested last year in New York after stealing debit card data from the National Bank of Ras Al-Khaimah in the United Arab Emirates and Bank Muscat in Oman in two attacks in December 2012 and February 2013, according to U.S prosecutors.¹⁴² Experts estimate that three-quarters of internet users in the UAE will become victims of cybercrime. Seventy-five percent of the hacking is expected to target bank accounts.¹⁴³ In late 2012, a report recorded the country's spam rate 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.¹⁴⁴ In July 2012, the TRA denied claims that the hacktivist group Anonymous "penetrated the country's proxy server and extracted a list of blocked website addresses."¹⁴⁵

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

137 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.

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

139 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>.

140 McGliney, Shane. "UAE firms targets for cyber crime: Abu Dhabi Police." September 16, 2013. <http://www.itp.net/594909-uae-firms-targets-for-cyber-crime-abu-dhabi-police>.

141 Zawya. "UAE TRA continues fight against spam text messages on mobile phones." July 24th, 2013. http://www.zawya.com/story/UAE_TRA_continues_fight_against_spam_text_messages_on_mobile_phones-GN_24072013_250761/.

142 Reuters. "Six Arrested In \$45m Global Cybercrime Involving RAKBANK, Bank Of Muscat." November 19, 2013. <http://gulfbusiness.com/2013/11/six-arrested-in-45m-global-cybercrime-involving-rakbank-bank-of-muscat/#.U2vV9q1dVqs>.

143 John, Issac. "Cyber security risks on the rise, study reveals." Khaleej Times. June 28, 2013. http://www.khaleejtimes.com/kt-article-display-1.asp?xfile=data/uaebusiness/2013/June/uaebusiness_June311.xml§ion=uaebusiness.

144 Arabian Gazetteer, "UAE to Face Advanced Cybercrime in 2013," December 9, 2012. <http://arabiangazette.com/uae-face-advanced-cybercrime-2013/>.

145 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>.

Emirati activists have also reported spyware and malware attacks against their computers. In one case from January 2013, a user received an email 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.¹⁴⁶

146 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/>.