

RELEASE IN FULL

**From:** Mills, Cheryl D <MillsCD@state.gov>  
**Sent:** Tuesday, February 9, 2010 4:04 PM  
**To:** H  
**Subject:** FW: FYI - Internet "Lack of Freedom" - Riyadh moves to regulate net news

FYI

**From:** Wittes, Tamara C  
**Sent:** Tuesday, February 09, 2010 3:11 PM  
**To:** Djerassi, Alexander M; Bennett, Virginia L; Sullivan, Jacob J; Reines, Philippe I; Rooney, Megan; Steinfeld, Andrew W; Sanderson, Janet A; Harris, Joshua M; Wittes, Tamara C; Valmoro, Lona J; Crowley, Philip J; Merrill, Nicholas S; Adler, Caroline E; Yehl, Ashley C; Mills, Cheryl D; Pandith, Farah A; Chandler, Karen R; Nantongo, Mirembe L; Ziadeh, Susan L; Abedin, Huma  
**Subject:** FYI - Internet "Lack of Freedom" - Riyadh moves to regulate net news

Given the proximity of this announcement to her internet freedom speech, she should probably be prepared to address it. I would hope that a way could be found to raise the issue.

Is Alec Ross going to be traveling with S to Saudi? If so, maybe he could do a meeting with a group of bloggers and/or online journalists.

## Riyadh moves to regulate net news

<http://www.thenational.ae/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20100209/FOREIGN/702089866/1042>

Carlyle Murphy, Foreign correspondent

- Last Updated: February 08, 2010 11:46PM UAE / February 8, 2010 7:46PM GMT

Saudi Arabia is planning to introduce regulations that include licensing internet news sites in a bid to bring them under government control. Ali Jarekji / Reuters

RIYADH // Saudi Arabia is planning to introduce regulations, including a licensing requirement, for its indigenous internet news sites, which have become a key fixture in the kingdom's active online community.

The draft regulations, still under study, would require internet-based news sites to request a government licence and to respond to complaints about their content that are received by the ministry of culture and information.

"We want them to feel that they are under our umbrella," Abdul Rahman al Hazza, spokesman for the ministry, said in a phone interview yesterday.

Mr al Hazza referred to the new rules as "guidelines for the e-press", and said the idea is to help the electronic media with staffing and financing and give them "somebody to talk to" if they have problems. "It's going to be simple and easy."

Asked if the new rules would involve censorship, Mr al Hazza replied: "Not that much." Mainly, he added, if there are complaints about something written at an online news site, "we just look at it".

A report last year in the Saudi Gazette said the draft regulations also cover "appointment conditions for editors-in-chief, granting permits to journalists, and invitations to cover news events".

A 2007 law already subjects online writers to criminal penalties for such things as defamation.

The planned regulations, which Mr al Hazza said are still two to three months away from being finalised by the ministry, are an effort to bring online news sites such as Sabq, Alweeam and A'ajel under government control in much the same way that the country's traditional daily newspapers are regulated.

It is not clear if news sites like Elaph.com, which is London-based but has a Riyadh office, would also have to get a licence.

Saudi newspapers are licensed by the government and can be temporarily stopped from publishing if they print something upsetting to a government official. But this has been rare in recent years, during which the Saudi print media has been encouraged to report more critically on social and economic problems. There is considerable self-censorship, however, as the media stay away from sensitive issues.

Although the draft regulations under consideration do not apply to bloggers, there are concerns that the government eventually will try to regulate them as well.

"They are not talking about blogs" right now, observed one veteran Saudi blogger, Ahmed Ba-Aboud. "But eventually they will get to us. It is a concern."

Mr Ba-Aboud, 38, a management consultant in the kingdom's Eastern Province city of Dhahran, said the government does not understand that online media are attracting readers because they are not controlled like traditional newspapers. "There's no way I'd send anything I write to the government to censor it," he said. "That's not how the internet works."

Ahmed al Omran, who blogs at [www.saudijeans.org](http://www.saudijeans.org), was caustic about what he called the ministry's "dumb idea to regulate so-called electronic media".

"Ironically, some owners of news websites are actually pushing for this law," Mr Omran lamented in a posting last month.

"They argue that it would make it easier for them to get funding and make money from advertising. What about their independence and freedom that could be threatened by the new law? Well, apparently these things are not high on their agenda."

Saudi Arabia's sprightly blogging community includes both Saudis and foreigners writing in both Arabic and English. It also boasts one of the region's highest proportion of female bloggers – about 46 per cent, according to a 2009 study by Harvard University's Berkman Center for Internet and Society. About one-third of the kingdom's population regularly goes online.

The community's latest arrival showed up February 2, when Mr Ba-Aboud launched a new English-language blog so that outsiders can learn more about "regular people like myself".

Most foreigners know certain kinds of Saudis, Mr Ba-Aboud said in an interview, including "extremists like Osama bin Laden", "rich people" and "people related to the government".

But the voice of ordinary Saudis “does not reach around the globe in a similar magnitude”, he wrote at the new site, <http://alternativesaudivoices.wordpress.com>.

It will be a sort of communal blog in that Mr Ba-Aboud has invited anyone to contribute a posting, and as co-ordinator, he will post them on the site. Only those that “call for hate or violence” will be rejected, he added.

In an interview last November, Mr al Hazza, the ministry spokesman, said the new regulations arose partly because ordinary citizens “don’t know where to go” to complain about something written at an online news site.

“The problem we have is that there is no government department to refer to ... Nobody to evaluate their job to see if they are doing wrong or right.”

Censorship “is not the idea” behind the new rules, he said. “The idea is to regulate.”

Mr al Hazza said a decision will probably be made in the next couple of weeks about whether the new regulations shall be issued by the minister of culture and information, Abdel Aziz al Khoja, or be sent to the Shoura Council for action.

Meanwhile, anyone wanting to send Mr al Khoja a comment on the new rules can reach him at his personal page at Facebook

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