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**Contribution of Reporters Without Borders (a non-governmental
organisation in special consultative status) about press freedom in
SAUDI ARABIA**

Introduction: Overview of press freedom situation

Saudi Arabia is one of the world's harshest towards press freedom, with hardline religious elements and the fight against terrorism holding back political reforms. The media is tightly controlled by the Al-Saud family and the Higher Media Council, chaired by interior minister Prince Nayef, keeps a grip on all news. The tame local media content means most Saudis get their news and information from foreign TV stations and the Internet. Enterprising journalists pay dearly for the slightest criticism of the authorities or the policies of "brother Arab" countries. As several other journalists, Wajiha al-Huwaider, well-known for her commitment for women's rights, has been banned from writing in the Saudi media since August 2003.

1. Online freedom

Saudi Arabia in February 2008 set up a special commission with funds of more than 2 billion dollars to take an inventory of its network and to improve its quality, security and reliability. Unlike others, censorship is not dressed up as a "technical problem" and the Saudi filters clearly indicate which websites are being censored. The kingdom decided to regulate the spread of news and information online and its control is carried out completely legally. Sites referring to the condition of women are substantially filtered, making impossible all searches for health information, about breast cancer for example. Nearly 400,000 Web pages are blocked in the kingdom because of their "immoral" content. A commission is to set up quality labels to "protect Saudi society" from this type of content.

Filtering the Net, initially carried out by the Internet Service Unit, which comes under the department of science and techniques of the King Abdul Aziz university, was given, in March 2007, to a new specialised commission linked to the government, which stepped up filtering of the Internet to fight "terrorism, fraud, pornography, defamation" and ""violation of religious values". Measures were taken within this framework at the start of 2008 to make every provider or distributor of computer software answerable if they fail to respect the law.

2. Government steps to improve the situation

Some reforms begun in Saudi Arabia have had a slightly good effect on both society and the media. But the royal family and religion still cannot be criticised, and the media's margin for manoeuvre has significantly increased. Newspaper editors are still under pressure to avoid discussing the country's international relations or national security. When "mistakes" are made, they are usually encouraged to dismiss the journalists considered to be "disrespectful" by the regime. The authorities are not inclined to reverse this situation. Keeping a tight control on the media has been the general trend for years.

3. Working with non-governmental organisations (NGO)

The Saudi government has never replied to solicitations of Reporters Without Borders. Local NGOs face a lot of pressure and their activities have a limited impact.

4. Recommendations


-Reporters Without Borders urges the Saudi authorities to embark on a thorough reform of the publications law in order to decriminalize press offences and guarantee journalists greater freedom of expression.

-Reporters Without Borders calls on Saudi Arabia to lift the ban on independent journalists in the Kingdom.

-Reporters Without Borders urges the Saudi government to lift censorship and guarantee the free flow of information on the Internet.

The data in this report has been gathered and verified by Reporters Without Borders, which has a network of correspondents in 130 countries and partner organisations in a score of countries.

In some countries, a journalist can be imprisoned for several years just for a word or a photo someone does not like. Reporters Without Borders, founded in 1985, works daily to support press freedom because imprisoning or killing a journalist removes a key witness and threatens the right of all of us to be kept informed of the news.

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