



AFTE Releases Digital Freedom

Closing Windows.. Censorship of the Internet in Egypt

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Report prepared by Mohammad El-Taher

The number of blocked websites in Egypt since May 2017 has reached at least 497 websites. AFTE had issued two reports on blocking: The first: “Decision from an Unknown Body: On blocking websites in Egypt”; and the second: “Occasionally by Decree.. Update on the Block of Websites in Egypt”, which involved monitored monitoring and analysis of blocking websites and censorship of the Internet from technical and legal aspects. Since the second report of 7 December 2017 until the end of January 2018, the organization has documented the blocking of 31 new websites, so that the number of blocked websites, although high, does not constitute a real indication of the Authority’s practices to impose control over online news in Egypt as much as the blocked websites indicate the state’s tendency to impose internet censorship in general. AFTE publishes this paper to clarify our position regarding the blocking and internet censorship as well as present information reached so far.

The novelty of blocking for the user

Egypt did not know the practice of blocking websites before, and thus the skill of bypassing censorship was not one of the basic skills acquired by the Egyptian user during the usual use of the Internet, as in some Arab countries that have a history of blocking practices, which led its citizens to acquire skills of dealing with the internet. With the increase in the number of blocked websites in Egypt, social networks were flooded with advice to bypass the block and links to free services that enable users to access blocked websites such as Tor browser, VPN services, and proxy servers. Some blocked websites began to direct their audience through social networks to rely on proxy servers as a free and easy-to-

use way to access the content of blocked websites, while many activists who are interested in countering Internet censorship have written about how to rely on Tor browser and VPNs to bypass Blocking. On the other hand, blocked websites have tried to find easy mechanisms to reach their audiences, such as relying on alternative platforms to publish their material, or relying on services such as AMP, one of the most important services provided by Google on which millions of Website depend.

Block of AMP, a website that affects millions of others

Speedy mobile service is one of the widely used services by popular Websites and has been used by many blocked websites as a counter blocking mechanism. Google had announced the service in October 2015, in partnership with the European Digital News Initiative and in collaboration with a group of other publishers and technology companies around the world, including Twitter, WordPress, LinkedIn and Pinterest.

AMP originally aimed to focus on improving performance of web pages on mobile phones to provide a convenient experience for smartphone users. The project provides an open source tool that enables online publishers to increase the speed of downloading and browsing their websites through smart phones, at a speed that is 10 times faster than the normal one. The tool also provides a visual view of pages compatible with smart phones regardless of the different sizes of screens for mobile phones and tablets. These features can also be used to copy websites intended for traditional computers.

Web websites use many techniques to speed up the download of web pages on smart phones in the framework of providing a good service to its audience, especially as some studies said that 53% of users do not continue to wait for the download if the load time exceeded more than a few seconds. Therefore, download speed and adapting web pages for smartphones is one of the most important standards that people and publishers are interested in, especially as smartphone searches account for 60% of all searches around the world.

Scope of AMP use

The prevalence of AMP use was so rapid that Adobe announced a 405% increase in service usage during the period from the beginning of the service announcement until December 2016. In February 2017, the percentage of web pages viewed by AMP reached 7% of the total number of pages browsed by users in the United States. In May 2017 Google announced that the number of websites that use AMP has reached 900 thousand websites with a total of more than 2 billion web pages. And in October 2017 Google announced that the number of websites that rely on this service has reached about 25 million websites and a total number of pages approaching 4 billion web pages.

Several popular websites with huge and diverse content, technology companies, media and press organizations, and some search engines participate in the development of AMP technology. For example, among news websites that use AMP are CNN, The New York Times, CNBC, The Washington Post; there are also search engines, in addition to Google, that use AMP, such as Bing and Baidu search

engine. It is also used and developed by some social networks such as Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn and Reddit, content publishing platforms such as Medium, Templer and Drupal, and e-commerce websites such as Ebay and AliExpress.

How websites in Egypt used AMP to confront the block

The AMP service shows alternative links to the original links in the search results on Google's search engine, pointing to other links from the Google domain, which means that if a blocked website appears in Google search results and that website uses AMP, the user will be redirected to an unblocked page. This is the method adopted by some blocked websites in Egypt, where the links produced by AMP were used and disseminated on social networks to reach the public with no need for technical expertise to overcome the blockage.

How did AMP block affect access to millions of websites?

After the spread of the use of the AMP service by some blocked websites in Egypt, including the Mada website, the Egyptian government resorted to blocking the service on February 3, 2018, which affected smart phone users using Google's search engine for any website that uses AMP. Users were thus unable to access these websites, including websites that the Egyptian government has not blocked. Consequently, Google has announced the suspension of the service in Egypt.

Blocking tools to counter censorship and expansion of blocks

Egyptian authorities quickly recognized the growing culture of bypassing blocks. At the end of August 2017, the Egyptian government took another line in Internet censorship. AFTE monitored the blocking of 261 websites in August 2017 from VPN providers and proxy servers. Earlier it had blocked the Tor website and all its affiliated websites. It is noteworthy that the number of Egyptian users who searched the Google search engine for ways to bypass the blocking of websites has recorded an increase since the time the blocking began, as shown in the data provided by the Google Trends platform.

Several blocked websites that provide news and media content began to use other platforms than their blocked websites, such as Facebook. Other websites moved to rely on certain techniques such as Google's accelerated mobile phone (AMP), which has also been blocked as mentioned above, or Facebook instant articles, which is similar to AMP, and is also suitable for use as one of the tools that enable access to blocked websites with no need for professional expertise in circumvention.

Some other websites have used alternative links to their content through proxy servers to provide their users with unobstructed links, such as relying on the descriptive search engine search to provide links from blocked Web pages through proxy servers. Others still resorted to re-publish their content on platforms of mass dissemination such as Medium. A number of websites have also sought to change their domain name to another that is not blocked, but in most cases the alternative domains have been blocked as well.

One of the observations that can confirm the government's intention to expand the blocking of websites is that all blocked websites are not only blocked, but the subdomains of the original domain of the targeted website are blocked as well. For example, the blocking of the Torproject.org website was accompanied with the block of 6 other websites that use subdomains of the primary domain, such as metrics.torproject.org, although the website only provides data on the number of Tor users. Similarly, a sub-domain of Reporters without Borders (<http://deadtweet.rsf.org>) was blocked. With the block of Al Jazeera channel, 9 sub-domains were also blocked although some of them do not present any political content such as Al-Jazeera sports and a website for learning Arabic language. While subdomains of some blogs that use the famous Blogger service were blocked, the main domain (blogspot.com) was not blocked.

Blocking the Tor network services

The Tor Project is one of the most important and effective tools to counter Internet censorship. The Tor project is developing a browser for anonymity to enable users to bypass websites blocking by easily connecting to the Tor network. It has also developed a technology that enables its users to bypass a block of the Tor network itself if it is blocked in any state, called the Tor Bridges.

The number of Tor users increased in Egypt after blocking websites from fewer than 1,000 users to more than 2,000 users. The number of users jumped to nearly 21,000 at the beginning of September 2017 after blocking VPN services, proxy servers, and some software websites that offered users the ability to bypass blocking, such as Psiphon.

Blocking the Medium platform

Following the blocking of news websites in Egypt, some of the banned websites started to publish their content on the Medium platform as the new Arab and Arab 21 website, in an attempt to provide their material on unobstructed platforms in Egypt. However, the Egyptian government blocked the website in June 2017. The block of Medium added another major constraint on internet use, since it is a platform for collective publishing, widely used by bloggers and institutions, and involves millions of pages in all fields and in several languages. The number of its pages archived on Google exceeds 14 million web pages.

Seeking control over exchange news and information

The beginning of the blocking, in May 2017, was directed at websites that provided news and media content, which were not controlled by the Authority, whether through ownership of the newspapers or the relations between some of the businessmen and the security services in Egypt.

The blocking began with 21 websites, all – with the exception of two – provided press and media content. Later the number continued to increase, including journalistic websites, reaching at least 108 websites, ranging from news websites, satellite websites, and independent press websites, in addition to blocking six blogs, including one of the first Egyptian blogs, the blog of Manal and Alaa, which has a long history of supporting blogging activities since its inception in 2004. The blog hosted other Egyptian blogs and provided technical support at the start of blogging in Egypt.

The list of blocked news websites in Egypt included a wide range of popular websites, such as Mada Masr and all the websites belonging to Al Jazeera channel, El-Arabi Al-Gadid, Al-Manassa, Daily News Egypt, Al-Badil and Masr Al-Arabeya. The list also included a number of local news websites with a relatively limited audience, what can be interpreted as a decision by the Egyptian government to take full control of the quality of news published on the Internet, including those that are traded on a limited scale.

Egyptian authorities have also blocked websites providing human rights content, amounting to 12 websites, such as the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information, Human Rights Watch, Reporters without Borders, the Egyptian Commission for Rights and Freedoms and the Journalists Observatory against Torture.

Some of the blocked websites, such as the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI), have a special importance for the Arab content on the Internet, which makes it an important aspect of freedom of information and its block negatively affects available information relating to the human rights situation in Egypt, especially in the period preceding the January 2011 revolution. ANHRI has been working on collecting and archiving publications, reports and statements of human rights organizations in the Arab region from 2003 to 2014. The importance of the legal archive available on the website is that it covers the period when Arab human rights organizations did not own their own websites and depended on the ANHRI website as a platform for publication. . The Arabic Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI) is one of the largest Arabic-language human rights websites on the Internet. Its website covers the work of nearly 400 human rights organizations and contains tens of thousands of pages.

As for Human Rights Watch it was blocked after the organization published a report on torture in Egyptian prisons. The importance of the website stems not only from its affiliation to one of the largest international organizations working to support and promote human rights. However, for the Arabic content on the Internet as well, the blocking of the website constitutes a loss for users, especially researchers, journalists and academics interested in the human rights situation. It is also the first international human rights website that provides an Arabic copy of all its contents, and has a tremendous amount of reports and data on the human rights situation not only in Egypt but in the whole world, so that the number of pages archived in the Google search engine exceeds 180 thousand webpages.

The Reporters without Borders website was blocked after a period of work by the organization to support and promote freedom of the press in Egypt and focus on cases imprisoned journalists in Egypt. What is surprising about blocking RSF is that the Egyptian government has blocked a large number of websites affiliated to the organization, including the website of Reporters without Borders in Germany, a German-only website, and an unusual language to be learned in Egypt as opposed to the widespread use of the English language. Also blocked was the Media Ownership Monitor, available in English and French and some of its content is available in Arabic; it focuses ownership of media outlets in a group of countries not including Egypt.

AFTE's position

AFTE affirms its total rejection of any kind of censorship imposed on freedom of expression, freedom of the press and freedom of the Internet. In AFTE's view, the practice of the Egyptian government since 24 May 2017 is a continuation of the political will of the Egyptian authorities to impose control over public space and control of the various platforms for freedom of expression, whether newspapers, satellite channels or digital platforms, and AFTE believes that it cannot separate practices of blocking websites by the Egyptian authorities from the restructuring of the media market, both read and visual in an attempt to control and limit the impact of digital media and journalism. AFTE affirms the negative impact of the blocking on the entire digital press industry in Egypt and the future of investing in it in the light of economic crises hitting most the press and media institutions in addition to an unsuitable working environment for journalists and media professionals.

In the opinion of AFTE, the Egyptian government by blocking websites violates provisions of Article 57 of the Constitution, which states: "... The State is also obliged to protect the right of citizens to use the means of public communication in all its forms, which may not be disabled or suspended or arbitrarily deprived, as regulated by the law; and article 65, which states: "Freedom of thought and opinion is guaranteed. Everyone has the right to free expression of opinion whether verbally, by writing, photography or other means of expression and publication". Also article 71 states that: "It is prohibited in any way to censor, confiscate, suspend or close Egyptian newspapers and media channels. In exceptional circumstances such as war or public mobilization, limited censorship may be imposed."

Egyptian authorities' practice of blocking websites also violates the provisions of article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states: "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression. This right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas to others by any means regardless of frontiers." Also, Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which states: 1. "Everyone has the right to hold opinions without interference. 2. Everyone has the right to freedom of expression, including the right to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, whether in written, printed, artistic or any other form of his/her choice..."

AFTE calls on the Egyptian government and telecommunications companies in Egypt to lift the block on all websites, and disclose the decision to block the websites, the body of its issuance and the legal basis of this decision.