

Attempt to restrict satellite broadcasting, electronic media continues

Arabic Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI) has spoken out against the efforts of the ministerial council of Arab information ministers, held in the headquarters of the Arab League from 20 - 21 June 2008, to further restrict satellite television broadcasting.

The meeting resulted in the release of a document employing overly broad terms to define a proposed regulatory framework for satellite channel transmissions. The meeting clearly pressured for the implementation of these guidelines, which were worded for ready adoption as national legislation - even though the participants insist the document is intended only as a "guide".

Representatives from Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Algeria in particular pressured for the document's use to amend the national legislation of participating countries. When Qatar opposed the proposal, Lebanon and the United Arab Emirates joined Qatar and expressed some reservations they had about the document's content; this, in turn, led the Egyptian information minister to describe the document as only a "guide", and demand the establishment of an Arab commission for information which would work toward implementing the recommendations of this document and would monitor what is being transmitted by satellite in the region.

"The way that the Arab information ministers spoke so often of 'freedom to expression' reminds us of how interior ministers speak of 'defending human rights' when they expand the use of torture," said Gamal Eid, the executive director of ANHRI.

As for electronic media, ANHRI asserts that launching an Arab electronic media committee, as also proposed, would complete the "confiscation - cancellation - censorship" triangle that restricts print and electronic media as well as satellite broadcasting. Considering this, it was not altogether strange to choose Saudi Arabia to host the headquarters of this proposed committee: the Kingdom is one of the fiercest enemies of the Internet in the world. The Kingdom's restrictive approach requires all Internet users to use alternative blogs and websites, as well as "proxy" servers and circumvention software capable of overcoming censorious barriers to access.

ANHRI stated: "The secretary general of the Arab League should align himself with freedom of the media and of expression, and should denounce this document. His adoption of the document clarifies that the League is a fragile entity that submits to the will of governments that work against freedom of expression."

There are 415 satellite channels in the region, of which 63 are governmental. Though the recommendations of this new document have not yet been implemented, three satellite channels - Hewan, Baraka, and Hikma are currently banned, and the equipment of a satellite transmission company have been seized. Morocco has restricted the transmission of Al-Jazeera.

This serves as an indicator on what is going to be the result of applying this document officially.

For update alerts on the Arab League's adoption of guidelines for satellite broadcasting, see: <http://www.ifex.org/en/content/view/full/91466>

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