What do the Trinity Davison Lutheran Church, the Filipino American Women’s Network, the Tuscon Jazz Institute, the Sacramento Police Activities League, the Pan Iranist Party of Iran, and the Salvation Army of Houston, Texas have in common?

Their websites are all blocked for Internet users in Saudi Arabia, and for most users in the United Arab Emirates. This is not because the governments of these countries disapprove of these websites. Rather, these sites are blocked by ISPs because of their use of the U.S.-made Internet blocking program “Smartfilter”, a program that often mistakenly categorizes these sites and many others as “pornography.”

The Smartfilter web blocking product has existed since 1996. In 2008, McAfee acquired Secure Computing, the company that manufactured Smartfilter. McAfee runs a support site at http://www.trustedsource.org/ that allows users to look up how sites are classified in Smartfilter’s rating system. For example, the screen captures here, here and here show http://www.trinitydavison.org/, http://www.paniranist.org/, and http://www.sahouston.org/ categorized as “pornography.” The lookup form does not give any reason why the sites would have been categorized as such, and none of these or other sites in our report contained any content that could be viewed as pornographic. The lookup form does, however, provide the option to email feedback to McAfee asking for a site’s classification to be changed. We did not submit any requests to change the classifications of any of the sites we found to be blocked.
A previous OpenNet Initiative report, “West Censoring East”, focused on the issue of American and Canadian software companies selling Internet filtering programs to government censors in the Middle East and North Africa. Countries like Saudi Arabia, UAE, Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman, Tunisia, and Iran have used Smartfilter at various times for nationwide Internet censorship. Currently, Smartfilter is only known to be used in Saudi Arabia and in UAE for customers of Etisalat, one of the UAE’s two main Internet providers. (The other Internet provider in the UAE, a telecom company known as “du”, uses the Canadian-made Netsweeper filter.)

McAfee maintains a centralized database of site categorizations. All Smartfilter customers download periodic updates to the database. If a site is newly categorized or re-categorized in Smartfilter’s database, these updates will be pushed out to customers usually within 24 hours. The Citizen Lab confirmed in summer 2013 that Smartfilter was still in use in Saudi Arabia and on UAE Etisalat by creating new websites and submitting them to Smartfilter to be blocked. The Citizen Lab verified that the sites became blocked in Saudi Arabia and on UAE Etisalat a few days later, while a control group of similar websites created at the same time did not become blocked.

Network administrators can choose the categories of sites to be blocked by Smartfilter. Our current tests indicate that Smartfilter is being used in Saudi Arabia and on UAE Etisalat with the “pornography” category blocked. We tentatively believe that the “nudity” category is also blocked in both Saudi Arabia and UAE since two sites in our sample—http://www.antgallery.org and http://www.midwivesofmaine.org—were classified under “nudity” (but not “pornography”) on trustedsource.org and were also found to be blocked while testing in both countries. With a sample size of just two sites, however, we decline to draw any definitive conclusions.
Our results also suggest that other related SmartFilter categories—such as “incidental nudity”, “sexual materials,” and “provocative attire”—are probably not blocked, with the exception of “incidental nudity,” which was is blocked in UAE but not Saudi Arabia (see below). For each of those categories, we found sites which trustedsource.org classified in that category, but were still available in both countries:

- The sites http://www.bearyouth.org, http://www.harborhouse.org, and http://www.naturalbirthcenter.com are all categorized on trustedsource.org under “sexual materials.” While these are probably errors, the sites themselves do not appear to have any sexual content. The sites are not blocked in Saudi Arabia or on UAE Etisalat.

- The sites http://www.blog.fr, http://www.angelaguevara.org, http://www.mccullagh.org and http://www.vnvmc-wi.org were all categorized as “incidental nudity.” These four sites were all accessible in Saudi Arabia in our testing, but were blocked on UAE Etisalat. This suggests that UAE Etisalat has enabled the “incidental nudity” category whereas Saudi Arabia has not.

- The sites http://www.arabimagefoundation.org, http://www.ariana.org and http://www.hoopgirl.com/ are all classified under the “provocative attire” category. They are not blocked in either country.

Using an ad hoc combination of domain name sampling and automated web spidering, we found over 100 sites that were mistakenly classified as “pornography” by Smartfilter, and hence were blocked in Saudi Arabia and on UAE Etisalat as of writing. As our testing could only sample a small portion of the Web, our list should not be taken to represent more than a fraction of sites misclassified by Smartfilter.

For most domain names, it was impossible to discern why the sites may have been classified as “pornography.” In some cases, however, probable reasons for blocking could be reasonably inferred. Some blocked sites were using domain names that sounded as if they might have previously been registered as pornographic websites. The Internet Archive’s “Wayback Machine” can be used to check whether any such domains might have hosted pornographic content in the past. Through the site, we checked the history of six domains whose names sounded as if they could plausibly have been used to host pornography: bearyouth.org, bigmatt.com, caseydonovan.org, easyaction.com, gerl.org, and theteacherspet.com. Of these, we found that bearyouth.org, easyaction.com and gerl.org all hosted adult content at some point in the past when the domains had different owners. It is reasonable to assume that most of the other domain names in our sample—such as 14thbrooklyn.org (The Society for the Historical Preservation of the Fourteenth Brooklyn) and FreeInTheAbingtons.org (a guide to low-cost recreational activities in Northeastern Pennsylvania)—are unique enough that it is unlikely they were previously owned by other parties, much less by pornographic websites.

Some sites were likely blocked due to the presence of a “trigger word” appearing in their domain name. The sites http://www.AgainstPornography.org and http://www.SearchingForMySpermDonorFather.org were presumably blocked because of the occurrence of the words “porn” and “sperm.” ScunthorpeGilbertAndSullivan.org (a Gilbert and Sullivan Society based in Scunthorpe, England) was presumably blocked due to the presence of the word “cunt” in the domain name. (This particular word filtering error is so common that it is known as the “Scunthorpe problem.”) BigHornBasinSFW.org, the website for the Big Horn Basin, Wyoming chapter of Sportsmen for Fish & Wildlife, was presumably blocked
because of the inclusion of the string “nsfw” (“not suitable for work”), an acronym commonly used to indicate pornographic or otherwise workplace-inappropriate content.

The following is a sample of websites that we found to be blocked in Saudi Arabia and UAE Etisalat as a result of the site being misclassified by Smartfilter as pornography. Testing in Saudi Arabia was performed over October 16-17, 2013 on a VPN connection using HideMyAss Pro software, connected through an IP address registered to “National Computer Systems Co.” in Riyadh. We re-tested on November 27th using a connection through the King Abdulaziz City For Science And Technology, and found the sites listed below were all still blocked. Testing from within the UAE was performed on November 3rd, 2013 by an anonymous volunteer. When a blocked site was accessed from within Saudi Arabia, it would display this page indicating that the site had been blocked. When a blocked site was accessed on UAE Etisalat, it would bring up this error page, displaying the message:

![Error Page](image)

It is not clear whether this page is intended to mislead users into thinking the website is temporarily down (as opposed to being blocked by the ISP). While the error message seems to indicate a temporary failure, the title of the error page (clearly visible in the screen capture linked above) is listed as “Blocked URL”. It is also not clear why the error message is displayed in English.

In our list of sites below, each entry is accompanied by a screen capture of the site being categorized on McAfee’s trustedsource.org site as pornography, along with a screen capture of the site being blocked from within Saudi Arabia. We did not collect screen captures of blocking within UAE, other than the single screen capture linked above, due to the time constraints on our volunteer tester preventing the collection of every site. Smartfilter might change its classifications of these sites after this post is published; the most current classifications can be looked up using McAfee’s form at [http://trustedsource.org/en/feedback/url?action=checksingle](http://trustedsource.org/en/feedback/url?action=checksingle).

For each list entry, the letters “ts” are linked to a screen capture of the site’s categorization on McAfee’s trustedsource.org site, and the letters “sa” are linked to a screen capture of the site being blocked in Saudi Arabia.

• http://www.905realestate.com(ts)(sa): Website of a real estate agent in the 905 area code of Toronto, Canada.
• http://www.abve.org(ts)(sa): American Board of Vocational Experts, a professional credentialing body.
• http://www.aialalafayette.org(ts)(sa): The Acadiana Indian Association, a Native American cultural organization in the Acadiana region of Louisiana.
• http://www.amitayu.org(ts)(sa): The Amitayu Buddhist Society of Taiwan
• http://www.annieoakley.org(ts)(sa): An information site about animal service, therapy, and rescue organizations.
• http://www.argun.org(ts)(sa): A Turkish news site.
• http://www.art-com.org(ts)(sa): A Polish graphic design company website, including a design portfolio.
• http://www.babele.org(ts)(sa): An Italian site about medieval instruments.
• http://www.barenboismaidusa.org(ts)(sa): A youth orchestra featuring musicians from Israel, Palestine, and various Arab countries.
• http://www.big-cats.org(ts)(sa): A German site about the protection of big cat species.
• http://www.botsis.com(ts)(sa): Website for an island guest house in Greek.
• http://www.braai.com(ts)(sa): A site about an effort to create a national common heritage day in South Africa. (Note: This site was blocked in Saudi Arabia but was not blocked in the UAE, either on November 4th or on a subsequent test on November 26th, despite the fact that it was categorized on trustedsource.org as pornography on both of those dates. This is an unexplained anomaly, since all other sites classified as pornography were blocked in the UAE. There is no obvious reason why UAE censors would have granted an exemption to this site in particular.)
• http://www.breit.org(ts)(sa): A German-language website featuring local news from Germany.
- **http://www.carensect.org**: The Care Net Pregnancy Resource Center, an informational resource about birth control and abortion.
- **http://www.caseydonovan.org**: The official fan site for a singer from Sydney, Australia.
- **http://www.caviardefrance.com**: A French caviar company.
- **http://www.ccfei.org**: The California Center for Economic Initiatives, a non-profit whose mission is “to encourage environmental stewardship among inner city youth.”
- **http://www.cdldb.org**: An informational site about French bulldog breeds.
- **http://www.ceconjoanadarc.org**: Instituto Joana D’arc (The Joan of Arc Institute), Spanish-language site for an institute fighting the spread of AIDS in Paraguay.
- **http://www.centrodelluomo.org**: An international non-profit head-quartered in Italy that promotes volunteer service work.
- **http://www.chapelle-bellouin.com**: The official website for Château de La Chapelle Bellouin, a French castle and tourist attraction.
- **http://www.chinesepered.org**: A site about Chinese crested dogs.
- **http://www.choice-music.com**: An entertainment firm providing DJs for hire for weddings and other events.
- **http://www.climateaction.org**: A site operated by the Green America foundation to raise awareness of climate change.
- **http://www.cmrcm.org**: Central Massachusetts Radio Control Modellers, a hobbyist site for radio control modelling.
- **http://www.computergarage.org**: A site publishing tips and tricks for troubleshooting computer problems.
- **http://www.crbc-cr.org**: The “Celebrate Recovery” program, operated by the Calvary Road Baptist Church in Alexandria, Virginia, Christian-themed addiction recovery program.
- **http://www.creatingabeautifulworld.org**: A site with advice about home improvement and home investment.
- **http://www.cuge.org**: The Columbia University Games Club, an extra-curricular club at Columbia University in New York City.
- **http://www.cumasch.org**: An Italy-based activist site, described as “a movement of young people united by their passion for their land and their culture.”
- **http://www.dancelegacy.org**: The website for Dance Mirror, an on-line dance magazine.
- **http://www.defrente.org**: A Spanish-language LGBT advocacy and activist site.
- **http://www.desertisland.org**: Website for a condominium complex in the Coachella Valley
- **http://www.dipendenza.org**: Centro Narconon Il Gabbiano, an Italian institute for combating drug and alcohol dependency
- **http://www.earthritis.com**: An informational site about treating and fighting arthritis.
- **http://www.easyaction.com**: The professional website of director and editor Ethan Shaftel
- **http://www.edenfarms.org**: Eden Farms, a pork seller owned by 30 farm families in the upper-Midwest United States.
- http://www.gerl.org: A blog by a girl named Jamiee from Asheville, NC.
- http://www.germanhouse.org: Max Kade Language House at the University of Virginia for students studying German.
- http://www.hctd.net: The “Human Communication and Technology Division” of the National Communication Association, an organization advancing the study of human communications.
- http://www.hoop-zone.org: A basketball gym in Austin, Texas, established as a non-profit with the goal of bringing life skills to the players who practice there.
- http://www.jaom.org: Jesus is Alpha and Omega Ministries, a Christian ministry based in Houston, Texas.
- http://www.kyrgyzembassyindia.org: Embassy of the Kyrgyz Republic (Kyrgyzstan) in India.
- http://www.lebanonreformedchurch.org: The Lebanon Reformed Church, in Lebanon, New Jersey, affiliated with the Reformed Church in America.
- http://www.liceomedi.org: Italian-language site for a linguistics institute in Italy.
- http://www.lifelinenetwork.org: A network of charities and NGOs located around the world.
- http://www.paniranist.org: Pan-Iranist Party of Iran, a political party supporting the reunification of Iranian people outside the borders of present-day Iran.
- http://www.pgrofms.org: Patriot Guard Riders of Mississippi, a volunteer organization devoted to “ensuring dignity and respect at memorial services honoring Fallen Military Heroes, First Responders and Honorably Discharged Veterans.”
- http://www.reunioncenter.org: Reunion Ministries, a religious non-profit organization offering counselling and healing services.
- http://www.robertmann.org: The personal site and travel blog of San Francisco Bay Area resident Robert Mann.
- http://www.sacpal.com: Sacramento Police Activities League, a non-profit, comprised primarily of Sacramento Police Department members, helping under-served youth of Sacramento.
- http://www.sbida.org: The Small Business Institute, an organization based in Clinton, Mississippi, dedicated to field-based student consulting and outreach to small businesses.
- http://www.searchingformyspermdonorfather.org: A UK-based website for people trying to connect with their sperm donor fathers and other relatives.
Most reports on Internet censorship in countries that practice nationwide Internet filtering have focused on the censorship of political content, adult websites, social networking, and media sharing sites such as Facebook and YouTube. This focus is logical since the blocking of these websites is likely to have a far greater impact on users than the blocking of relatively obscure sites. For the sake of thoroughness, however, we should not ignore the large numbers of sites that are blocked in censored countries simply because they have been misclassified by the manufacturer of the blocking program being used.

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