

Saudi Arabia to unblock internet calling apps

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Saudi Arabia will lift its ban on internet calling applications on Wednesday, such as Skype, easing restrictions online as the conservative kingdom faces new criticism over censorship

Saudi Arabia will lift its ban on internet calling applications on Wednesday, authorities said, easing restrictions online as the conservative kingdom faces new criticism over censorship.

Voice and video calling apps such as WhatsApp and Skype will be

"widely available to users", a government statement said Tuesday, in a move aimed at improving business confidence as the kingdom transitions into a post-oil era.

"Access to VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) will reduce operational costs and spur digital entrepreneurship," the statement said, citing a directive from the communications and technology ministry.

"Digital transformation is one of the key kick-starters for the Saudi economy, as it will incentivise the growth of internet-based businesses, especially in the media and entertainment industries."

The announcement comes a day after Al Jazeera lashed out at Snapchat for blocking the Qatari broadcaster from its app in Saudi Arabia at the request of Saudi authorities.

Saudi Arabia has long accused Al Jazeera of acting as a mouthpiece for extremist groups, a charge it denies.

Alongside the United Arab Emirates, Egypt and Bahrain, Saudi Arabia imposed a blockade on Qatar in June, in the worst diplomatic crisis to roil the Gulf in years.

Al Jazeera condemned the blocking as an assault on freedom of expression but the Saudi government vigorously defended its position.

"The recent cooperation with Snapchat to remove Al Jazeera, a harmful, propaganda-pushing channel that supports extremism, should not be considered in isolation or interpreted as a crackdown on free media," the Saudi statement said.

Saudi Arabia, with its bulging youth population, is among the world's top per capita users of social [media](#).

The internet represents a limited space for freedom of expression in a country with strict social codes.

More than half of Saudi Arabia's citizens are under 25, who spend much of their time on [social media platforms](#), away from official strictures and traditions.

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