

Response to the Public Consultation - Draft Decision on the Regulation of Virtual Private Networks

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Riyadh Al Balushi

<http://www.blue-chi.com/>

contact@blue-chi.com

(A) Definition of VPN

The proposed definition of Virtual Private Networks in the draft decision seems to be extremely wide as it could cover any sort of private network made over the internet. The following situations would be covered by the regulation as they all involve creating a private network using public network connections:

1. Remote Access Technologies: Such technologies allow a user to connect to his computer from outside the house, they are commonly made available for consumers to allow them to retrieve files from their home computer on their smart phones or other devices.
1. Multiplayer Online Games: Playing a multiplayer game will involve connecting to a private game network owned and operated by the game developer or game console manufacturers. This is not a feature exclusive to PC games as online gameplay is now an integral part of all major game consoles (for example the PS3 uses the PlayStation Network while the Xbox 360 has the Xbox Live).

It is unlikely that the TRA intends to regulate these two types of networks, both of which are private networks. The draft decision needs to define the meaning of “private use” and “private network” in order to make sure that the regulations do cover unintended areas.

(B) Consumer Exceptions

It is clear that the main purpose behind the regulation of VPN is to stop non-commercial users from using VPN to bypass internet regulation and anonymize their use. However, a case has to be made for students on distance-learning programs who might have to connect to their university’s VPN in order to access their university electronic resources such as the journal subscriptions, library catalogue, restricted applications and blackboard.

For example, the University of Southampton in the UK provides a VPN service for students to access the university network when they are off-campus:

<http://www.southampton.ac.uk/isolutions/computing/net/vpn/>

The University of Nottingham in the UK also provides a similar service for its students:

<http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/iss/support/knowledgebase/guides/IS1501.pdf>

Banning the use of VPN by students will make it impossible for students on distance-learning programs to complete their courses if they are based in Oman. It will also make it difficult for visiting researchers and Omani students in holiday to do any work while in the country.

Students should have the right to use VPN if they can prove that they are enrolled at a program in a university which uses a VPN to connect to its university electronic resources. The permission can be granted for the duration of the course only.