Edited by Carola Richter and Claudia Kozman

Arab Media Systems

https://www.openbookpublishers.com

Cover design by Anna Gatti based on a photo by Duangphorn Wiriya on Unsplash at https://unsplash.com/photos/KiMpFTtuuAk

9. Bahrain: Media-Assisted Authoritarianism

Marc Owen Jones

The media ecosystem in Bahrain has primarily been shaped by the security interests of the ruling family and its formal and informal protectors, initially the British, and following Independence in 1971, Saudi Arabia and the United States. From its inception just before the Second World War, to the Uprising of 2011, television, radio, and the local press have been leveraged as a means of distributing state propaganda and public relations. Technological change has been embraced, but only to the extent to which it facilitates Bahrain's neoliberal development as a commercial ICT hub. The rise of citizen journalism, social media, and de-spatialized technologies has prompted some resistance to this top-down media-assisted authoritarianism, but the regime has adapted to instrumentalize these new technologies as tools of surveillance.

Background

Bahrain is a small archipelago of 33 islands in the Persian Gulf. Within this archipelago, Bahrain Island is the most populous and the largest, forming around 83% of Bahrain's total landmass of around 780 square kilometers. Bahrain is situated off the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia and connected by the King Fahd Sea Causeway, which terminates in the Saudi city of Khobar. Its other immediate nearby neighbors include Qatar, to the east of Bahrain, and Iran to the north.

Arabic is the official language, but English and Persian are widely spoken by Bahraini citizens. Although Bahrain is small, it is densely populated with about 1.6 million people, of whom around 800,000 are non-Bahrainis (Information and eGovernment Authority, 2020). Like most Gulf states, large segments of the non-native population are workers from South Asia and the Philippines. As such, many other languages are commonly spoken, including Malayalam, Tagalog, Urdu, and Hindi. The majority of the native population are Muslims, broadly divided into Sunni Muslims and Shi'a Muslims. However, this sectarian simplification belies the fact that Bahrain's Muslim communities are characterized by diversity, both in terms of schools of thought and political opinions.

Bahrain is a nominal partial democracy, with an elected lower house and an appointed upper house. Bahrain has a constitution, although any amendments must be ratified by two-thirds of the lower house and appointed upper house, rendering change highly improbable. However, the ruler, King Hamad bin Salman Al-Khalifa, has the ability to rule by decree.

Like most Gulf states, Bahrain's political system has been defined in a number of ways, from a liberal autocracy, to a low-quality democracy, to an authoritarian regime (Jones, 2016). While the country is often characterized as a Sunni minority ruling over a Shi'a majority, this places too much emphasis on religious ideology. To clearly understand the current media system in Bahrain, one must consider that the media function in what has been called by some a kleptocratic autocracy. In this system, the ruling Al-Khalifa family monopolizes the country's material resources so that the institutions of state, including the media, function to prevent the occurrence of regime change which would otherwise alter the disbursement of this wealth to a broader segment of the population, most of whom have historically been Shi'a.

Tribal rule has profoundly influenced the media system in Bahrain. The Al-Khalifa family conquered Bahrain in the late 1700s and has since dominated positions of government. Initially, it subjugated the indigenous *baḥārna* population of mostly Shi'a Arabs to a form of feudal rule. This population was often subject to brutal oppression by the Al-Khalifas and their tribal allies. However, Bahrain's small size has meant that the Al-Khalifa regime has always derived much of its power

and legitimacy from external sources. In the 1800s, the British signed a series of peace treaties with the Al-Khalifas and other ruling tribes across the Gulf. The overarching consequence of these treaties was that the British would thereafter protect the ruling tribes of the Arabian littoral as long as the tribes prevented piracy on British shipping.

Issues of domestic politics were generally overlooked by the British, although this began to change in the 1920s. Reforms imposed by the British designed to mitigate oppression of the *baḥārna* also resulted in consolidating the power of the ruling family. As far as the British were concerned, the Al-Khalifas supported British interests in the region, and were useful allies, despite the political costs.

Indeed, one of the most salient characteristics of Bahrain is its dependence on outside actors for legitimacy and support (Khalaf, 1998), which has had a profound role on the securitization of the media. During the 1950s and 1960s, two significant uprisings demanded increased citizens' participation in the political system. This further enforced the protectiveness of the Al-Khalifa-dominated institutions of the state, particularly those that were seen as a mobilizing force, such as the media.

Following independence from Britain in 1971, Bahrain increasingly turned to Saudi Arabia and the US for the support once offered by the British. Growing hostility from Saudi and the US administration towards Iran, especially after the 1979 revolution, brought a reversion to past practices of oppressing the local Shi'a population. This was not just the *baḥārna*, but also the *Ajam*, the Persian-speaking Bahraini citizens who originally came from Iran and settled in Bahrain. Growing Saudi influence and paranoia about Shi'a/Iranian expansionism resulted in the securitization of Bahrain's Shi'a community. Within this system, Shi'ites became second-class citizens, often prevented from entering positions of high office, whether in the government, media, or the military. This repression was one of the triggers for the 1990s intifada (uprising), where thousands of Bahrainis mobilized to demand political reform.

In 2002, Bahrain's King Hamad pushed forward the National Action Charter, a series of political reforms that created nominal democratic institutions. While this saw some media liberalization, it was short-lived. In 2011, thousands of Bahrainis took to the streets, demanding further political reform. They were, however, brutally repressed. Since then, the

ruling family has not simply sought to contain the opposition, but to instrumentalize the media—both state-owned and privately-owned—in order to execute their divide and rule strategies that serve to keep Bahraini society segmented and stratified in order to better control it.

Historical Developments

The growth of media in Bahrain in its modern form can be traced back to the 1930s when newspapers arrived in Bahrain under much suspicion. The British adviser Charles Belgrave, who was in Bahrain from 1926 and 1956, was responsible for formative media policy. His dislike of Arabic newspapers criticizing British imperialism in Bahrain and the Gulf resulted in a rather hostile environment for fledgling press outlets. As such, visas were required for all journalists in Bahrain. Belgrave became the *de facto* embedded foreign correspondent in Bahrain, writing English-language articles for *The Times*, and ensuring international news about the country was generally positive.

The first local newspaper, *Jaridat Al-Bahrain*, opened in 1939 and was designed primarily as a vehicle for British war propaganda. The *Bahrain Broadcasting Station* was also launched in 1940 and broadcast as far as East Asia. Like *Jaridat Al-Bahrain*, its primary purpose was to broadcast war propaganda and counter Germany's anti-British propaganda being disseminated across the Middle East from *Radio Berlin*. Given their limited purpose and scope, both *Jaridat Al-Bahrain* and the *Bahrain Broadcasting Station* closed down by the end of the Second World War in 1945 (Al-Rumaihi, 2002).

In 1950, the weekly paper, *Voice of Bahrain*, began publication. The years 1953–1956 also saw a blossoming of more critical media, defining the first true epoch of printed media in Bahrain. Newspapers such as *Al-Qafila*, *Al-Watan*, *Al-Shula*, and *Al-Mizan* were widely circulated in Bahrain. It was a time of growing Arab nationalism and anti-imperialism. Due to their nationalist leanings, which provoked the Al-Khalifa regime and their British protectors, all of these newspapers were closed by 1956, leading to years of press stagnation. One editor, Abdulrahman Al-Bakir, was even deported to the British territory of St. Helena for his alleged role in plotting to overthrow the regime. Following anti-imperialist and prodemocratic unrest in the 1950s, the government reacted by

introducing draconian press policies (Jones, 2020). Fear of another media renaissance that might offer support to other social movements led to stringent controls on publishing and broadcasting.

After 1956, the British kept tabs on any left-leaning publications, until they eventually decided that the lack of media was actually a problem. From the British perspective, it was held that the media should exist to promote the achievements and reforms initiated by the Bahraini government. Once again, the media in Bahrain were reimagined primarily for public relations and propaganda purposes. For this reason, the Bahrain PR Office was initially headed by a British officer, who ensured that all published material met with British approval. The mentality was that a response was needed to counter the propaganda pouring out of Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and later in the 1970s and 1980s, Iran. The British felt they could stave off unrest by reassuring the people about the modernization of Bahrain (Jones, 2020). Primarily, they believed they could convince Bahrainis that modernization under the Al-Khalifa regime was better than the alternatives in any other Arab republics.

Tentative steps by the government to liberalize the political system post-independence drove a number of media reforms. From 1976 to 1989, a total of 12 weekly, quarterly, daily, and monthly newspapers and magazines were created. Some of these were trade magazines for the Bahrain Petroleum Company (BAPCO) or the Bahrain Medical Association. However, the most prominent of these perhaps were Bahrain's daily newspapers, *Al-Ayam*, *Akhbar Al-Khaleej*, and the English-language the *Gulf Daily News*, the circulations of which reached 21,565, 22,000, and 9812 respectively in 2002 (Al-Rumaihi, 2002).

While *Bahrain Radio* reopened in 1955, it did so under tight restrictions, broadcasting mostly entertainment. This again reflected regime paranoia about propaganda. It was only in the 1960s that the quality of programming started to improve. An English service, *Radio Bahrain*, was introduced in 1977 to cater to Bahrain's blossoming non-Arabic speaking community. By 1991, *Bahrain Radio* had extended its broadcasting to 24 hours. As with many stations, it is now possible to listen to *Bahrain Radio* online, theoretically giving its audience unlimited reach.

Television broadcasting in Bahrain began in 1973 to coincide with the creation of Bahrain's National Assembly. This fledgling move towards representative democracy was one of many instances that showed that autocracy was loosening politically and, consequently, in the media sphere. Indeed, Bahrain was one of the few Gulf countries to license the creation of news broadcasting to the American company *RTV International*. This was short-lived, however, reflecting the rising ascendency of the conservative prime minister Khalifa bin Salman Al-Khalifa. Along with the dissolution of the short-lived National Assembly in 1975, *Bahrain TV* (*BTV*) was brought under the Ministry of Information, ostensibly due to *RTV*'s financial difficulties and rumored connection with the CIA (Al-Rumaihi, 2002).

As one of the first countries in the Gulf to undergo modernization, Bahrain was often technically ahead of the curve. It was the first country in the Gulf to broadcast in full color in 1977 when it started broadcasting news from Europe. By 1986, *Bahrain TV* had both an Arabic channel (*Channel 4*) and an English-language channel (*Channel 55*). By 1994, *BTV* was broadcasting about 540 hours per week across five channels (Al-Rumaihi, 2002). Yet, the content was often considered too parochial and unappealing to Bahrain's mixed demographic. While the media environment had tried to exclude foreign news over which there was little editorial control, efforts at internationalization sped up in the 1990s. This was partly driven by the 1991 Gulf War and public demand for information (Al-Rumaihi, 2002). Bahrain was also the earliest adopter of *ArabSat* in the Gulf. In the 1990s, Bahrainis were receiving via satellite content from *CNN*, Egypt, and the pan-Arab *MBC*, among others.

In the 1990s, Bahraini politics were defined by the intifada, where people once again took to the streets to demand reforms from the government. The media environment mirrored this, with its tight government hold on newspapers and television. Human rights organizations also reported multiple instances of trial by media, where political prisoners were paraded in front of national papers before trial, prejudicing their right to a fair hearing. Indeed, the role of state media in underscoring repressive policy, especially during times of crisis, was clear. Upon the death of Bahrain's ruler Shaykh Isa bin Salman Al-Khalifa in 1999, his son Hamad bin Salman Al-Khalifa came to power. After making himself king, Hamad introduced steps towards political

liberalization, including the superficial relaxing of rules around media outlets.

Political System and Legal Framework

As with most authoritarian states, and despite Bahrain's nominal democratic institutions, political control over state media is largely centralized under the Al-Khalifa-appointed government. This is increasingly evident in a stifling legal framework that seeks to strictly govern the behavior of publishers and journalists, imposing heavy fines for those who contravene the Press Law. The formalization of media laws began in the middle of the twentieth century. The democratic movement of the 1950s and the strikes of 1965 prompted the authorities to abandon any notion of progressive media reform. The shutting down of Bahrain's budding press in 1956 was crystallized firmly in 1965 with the introduction of the Press Law, which set the tone for all future media restrictions in Bahrain. Criticism of the ruler or his family was, and remains, outlawed, as was any news that criticized allied countries or harmed Bahrain's economy. Any form of published material, from newspapers to pamphlets, was subject to the Press Law. The law expanded an existing law prohibiting the performance of plays, public concerts, or recitals without permission. Both the media and any avenues of cultural production were, and remain, closely monitored. Books and videos imported into Bahrain were often checked to see if they contained information critical of Bahrain.

Successive rulers of Bahrain have demonstrated hostility towards and suspicion of any media (Jones, 2020). Examples abound. During the election of newly formed labor committees in the 1970s and 1980s, the government instructed the media to keep coverage of the elections to a minimum. By 1985, the Ministry of Information's control of the media had exceeded that which was stipulated in the Press Laws, and a culture of self-censorship had emerged. The existence of this media culture of self-censorship was backed up by tough fines and potential prison sentences which were firmly embedded in law. This culture of censorship remains in place today. Following King Hamad's National Action Charter in 2001, a new era of relative press freedom was heralded in. As with independence in 1971, King Hamad sought to create a

clear break from the past and ostensibly bring in a new era of political and social reform. The newly launched Bahraini constitution of 2002 guaranteed, albeit in a heavily caveated fashion, freedom of the press under Article 23. However, prior to the formation of the parliament, the government exploited this opportunity to pass a series of statutory decrees limiting certain freedoms, including the new Press Law of 2002. Like its predecessor, this Press Law prevents criticism of the king, the regime, Islam, and other Arab and Muslim countries, among other things (ARTICLE 19 & Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy, 2016).

Despite this restrictive environment, the reforms saw the launch of *Al-Wasat* newspaper in September 2002, one of Bahrain's only opposition-leaning legal daily newspapers. Founded by Mansour Al-Jamri, *Al-Wasat* published op-eds by members of the Bahraini political opposition and was one of the only non-loyalist papers in Bahrain, along with the short-lived *Al-Waqt*, a leftist-nationalist-leaning paper published from 2006 to 2010. Founded by Khawla Mattar, *Al-Waqt* was the first newspaper in Bahrain to have a woman as editor-in-chief (Mattar & Seikaly, 2012). It included articles by political exiles, such as Abdulhadi Khalaf, who was briefly a Bahraini MP in 1973 but was then expelled for political activism. However, *Al-Waqt* closed following reported financial difficulties. In 2009, both *Al-Waqt* and *Al-Wasat* had estimated circulations of around 20,000 and 30,000, respectively (Fanack, 2016). While their criticism was at times quieted, they often called out government repression, investigating, for example, political gerrymandering that discriminated against the Shi'a population.

However, the relative media pluralization that followed the reforms of 2001 was short-lived. Saudi-led fear about Shi'a empowerment after the fall of Iraq's Saddam Hussein in 2003 once again prompted a sectarian and security-orientated contingent of hardline members of the ruling family to influence media policy. Former US Ambassador to Bahrain, William Monroe, noted that "royal court elements" had a "direct hand in a scathing press campaign launched by Arabic daily *Al-Watan* against NDI, the National Democratic Institute, other NGOs, and even the US Embassy" (Monroe, 2006). *Al-Watan* itself was known for its close ties to the royal court. At times, this level of personalistic influence by the likes

of the Prime Minister and other elements of the royal court indicated the extent of the Al-Khalifas' overreach in media affairs.

In 2006, Shaykh Ahmed Atayatalla Al-Khalifa, a conservative and influential member of the ruling family, reportedly established two media watch committees under the auspices of his office to intimidate journalists and editors into not writing articles that were deemed anti-regime. Shaykh Atayatalla's interference signified the influence of elements of a ruling Al-Khalifa core in controlling press freedom despite superficial institutional and constitutional safeguards. Like most political crises, the 2011 uprising that began on 14 February generated further securitization and coordination of media in Bahrain. The general harassment and intimidation of local journalists escalated sharply during the 2011 uprising. Bahrain was listed by Reporters Without Borders as one of the ten most dangerous places for journalists in the world after two journalists were killed and a number were detained and tortured (Bassiouni, Rodley, Al-Awadhi, Kirsch, & Arsanjani, 2011). In early 2011, *Al-Wasat* was targeted by pro-government thugs who attacked the company's printing press. The newspaper was eventually suspended on 2 April 2011, after the government used a raft of legal arguments to quash it. It was permanently shut down on 4 June 2017, signaling the end of any critical newspapers in Bahrain.

After the reforms of 2001, the government attempted to create the illusion of political distance from the media, turning the Ministry of Information into the Information Affairs Authority (IAA). Initially, this was headed by ruling family member Fawaz bin Mohammed bin Khalifa Al-Khalifa, and later Sameera Rajab. After the 2011 uprising, however, the IAA was subsumed under the Ministry of Information Affairs (MIA), which was created in 2014. The Ministry's role is to set policy and legislation and to oversee the media sector and its activities as well as to represent the "media sector before the Cabinet and the legislative authority" (Ministry of Information Affairs, 2020). The IAA remains the executive body for the media sector in Bahrain. It is tasked with operating official state media outlets, namely *Bahrain Radio*, *Bahrain TV*, and the official state news agency. The IAA also implements the policies issued by the MIA.

The Bahraini Independent Commission of Inquiry Report of 2011 stated that the media in Bahrain had been highly partisan during the

2011 uprising and that journalists, medical staff, and others in the state-controlled media had been defamed for their support of political reform (Bassiouni et al., 2011). As a result, the government set up the High Authority for Media and Communication (HAMC). The MIA describes the HAMC as an entity that proposes rules and regulations necessary to "upgrade the professions of media and communication" (Ministry of Information Affairs, 2020). It is also tasked with setting standards for "monitoring media and advertising content in different media and communication outlets." While the MIA claims that the HAMC is independent, its management is appointed by the government (Universal Periodic Review, 2017a). The ombudsman has not abated the authoritarian trajectory of media regulation in Bahrain. For example, in July 2016, the MIA issued Edict 68/2016, which requires newspaper outlets to obtain an annual license for disseminating printed or electronic content. It also forbids newspapers to livestream or produce videos longer than two minutes (Universal Periodic Review, 2017b). In general, the online media environment in Bahrain is so oppressive that people have been jailed for simply retweeting criticism of the king (Amnesty International, 2017). More insidiously, the Ministry of the Interior announced that anyone who even followed on *Twitter* the critics of government would be held legally accountable (Ministry of Interior, 2019). Thus, the aim again has been to dismantle the independent non-state social media news and information networks that formed after 2011.

The uprising prompted Saudi Arabia to ask Bahrain for cooperation among its media agencies to adopt strategies to counter what it stated were efforts by foreign agencies (most likely Iran and Lebanon's Hezbollah Party) to attack the reputation and stability of Bahrain. Saudi and the Al-Khalifas' fear of Shi'a empowerment in Bahrain, as well as historically rooted sectarianism, has compounded the obstacles to the development of media plurality in Bahrain. Even prior to 2011, the government had refused to issue newspaper and television licenses to predominantly Shi'a opposition groups such as *Al-Wefaq*. Consequently, in 2015, the Bahraini authorities quickly pulled the plug on Saudi Prince Al-Waleed bin Talal Al-Sa'ud's television channel *Al-Arab* within 24 hours of its first broadcast, reportedly because it aired an interview with a senior member of the Shi'a opposition group *Al-Wefaq*. This

reflected the government's desire to not give the Shi'a any type of political platform. Indeed, the country's Shi'a have long complained of marginalization not only in participatory politics but also in the country's media and cultural production in general. As one Bahraini merchant once told *The Washington Post*, "if you switch on the T.V., there is not a single program that refers to us, our history, our folklore, our geography. We are nothing" (Lawson, 2004).

Economy and Ownership Patterns

In addition to the lack of sovereignty and the growth of Saudi overrule, the privileges afforded to the ruling family by oil revenues have incentivized continued control over positions of authority. A devolved media structure and relaxation of ownership would fly in the face of long-held beliefs that a pluralistic media may generate criticism of government that could lead to revolution. At the same time, the need for direct foreign investment has driven the government to put emphasis on projecting an image of "business-friendly Bahrain" (Khalaf, 2013). In order to successfully project this image, the government has seized control of the ability to dominate messaging about Bahrain. As such, ownership is tightly controlled by the state, even if it is permitted privately. The strictures of the Bahraini Press Law ensure that only those of a sound reputation can own a media outlet. This is a means of ensuring government control of their patrons in the media both in theory and in practice.

Historically, there has been nominal private ownership of newspapers. For the period of 1962 to 1976, Bahrain's publications can be grouped into three categories: those owned privately by Bahrainis, those owned by the government, and non-Bahraini publications regularly read in Bahrain (Nakhleh, 2011). These included *Al-Adwa*, *Sada Al-Usbu*, the *Gulf Weekly Mirror* (English), *Al-Mujtama' Al-Jadid*, and *Al-Haya Tijariyya*. Given Bahrain's small size, the average circulation of these publications ranged from 2,500 to 3,500. Nakhleh's (2011) analysis of these publications concluded that none were critical of the government. Ideologically speaking, *Al-Adwa* and *Sada Al-Usbu* were considered by Nakhleh to be "moderate."

The two dominant Arabic language papers in Bahrain from 1976 to 1989 were *Al-Ayam* and *Akhbar Al-Khaleej*, both of which are still operating today. While *Al-Ayam* is owned by the eponymous Al-Ayam Press, Akhbar Al-Khaleej Press owns both *Akhbar Al-Khaleej* and its sister English-language paper the *Gulf Daily News*. As well as extensive government oversight, the circulation of Bahrain's press during the 1960s and 1970s was also stymied to some degree by illiteracy levels.

By 2011, six of Bahrain's seven daily newspapers were owned by pro-government Bahrainis or those affiliated with the royal family (Project on a Middle East Democracy, 2012). This, of course, has resulted in a lack of editorial diversity. Indeed, one archaic regulation of Bahrain's Press Law is that those who run a newspaper should be of "good character." Such subjective terminology essentially means that only those approved by the Al-Khalifa dominated ministry will be granted such a position. With the closing down of *Al-Wasat* in Bahrain, a significant number of Bahrain's most circulated English and Arabic language papers, including the *Gulf Daily News*, *Al-Ayam*, and *Akhbar Al-Khaleej*, are owned by only two companies. While these are privately-owned, they are still subject to the state's tight control.

Al-Watan is more vociferously pro-government and nationalist. Set up in 2005, it has a mostly Salafist board and is heavily influenced by Saudi Arabia. By 2009, *Al-Watan* had an estimated circulation of around 30,000 copies (Fanack, 2016). Its columns have generally reflected Sunni political opinion in Bahrain, especially after 2011 where it took an anti-opposition, rather than entirely loyalist, stance. When Saudi forces entered Bahrain in 2011 to put down the uprising, the Salafi Islamist political party, *Al-Asala*, took out an advertisement on the front page welcoming the Saudi forces (Monroe, 2012). The Minister of Information, Sameera Rajab, often writes a column in *Al-Watan*. Thus, ownership in Bahrain is largely irrelevant in the domestic press sector as it is so tightly controlled by the government.

Bahrain's television market is relatively small. The five main terrestrial channels are operated by the Bahrain Radio and Television Corporation (BRTC). In 2007, Bahrain's first privately-owned television channel, *Atlas Travel & Culture*, was launched. It was owned by businessman Jamil Wafa (Toumi, 2007). Pay-television and direct-to-consumer (DTH) are more popular than free-to-air (FTA) channels, with *Orbit Showtime Network*

(*OSN*) being one of the major players. While most radio stations are also state-owned, private channels such as the *South Asian Hindi* station and *Your FM* also operate (Dubai Press Club, 2018).

Technology and Infrastructure

While Bahrain's media are politically regressive, Bahrain has been an early adopter of technological change. It was one of the first Middle Eastern countries to launch the Internet in 1995, the first country in the Middle East to install a mainframe computer (1962), and the first to install a satellite station (1969). It was also one of the first countries to have commercially available 5G networks in 2019. Bahrain's small size and limited oil supplies have encouraged it to diversify into other sectors extremely quickly. It has had limited success with this, briefly becoming a regional banking hub following the civil war in Lebanon. While the 2011 uprising damaged this status, Bahrain is turning towards information and communication technologies (ICTs) to attract foreign direct investments through a partially deregulated economy, at least by Gulf standards.

Today, the Bahraini government, through the Telecommunications Regulatory Authority, is pushing forward the Fourth National Telecommunications Plans (NTP4), which seeks to improve Bahrain's communication and technology infrastructure for the country's 2030 Vision—a comprehensive economic plan for Bahrain. Bahrain's Economic Development Board has been keen to promote the fact that Bahrain offers 100% foreign ownership, unrestricted VoIP calls (e.g., Skype), and a free trade agreement with the US that offers "highly credible" intellectual property legislation. Above all, Bahrain asserts that it offers the most liberal ICT market in the Middle East, with the most robust infrastructure. As with many other Gulf countries, Bahrain is keen to project itself as open for business with regards to its media and digital infrastructure, as long as these will not deployed to criticize Bahrain's government policies.

Bahrain's relatively substantial wealth and small size have facilitated the rollout of a comprehensive Internet infrastructure. Internet penetration is extremely high, with 96% of households and 100% of businesses able to access broadband. By 2018, broadband subscriptions

had reached 2.16 million, representing a penetration rate of around 144%. A significant proportion of these were mobile subscriptions. In the same year, there were approximately 81 licensed operators in the telecommunications sector. Mobile phone penetration rates are currently around 133%. However, the majority of telecom sector revenue is held by three companies: *Batelco*, which is Bahrain's state-owned operator, *Viva Bahrain*, and *Zain Bahrain* (Telecommunications Regulatory Authority, 2018). As part of NTP4, Bahrain is rolling out a national fiber-based network to support ultrafast broadband.

The high penetration of mobile technology has resulted in Bahrain having a high take up of social media. From 2010 to 2014, Bahrain had from 500,000 to 600,000 *Facebook* users, of whom the majority (around 68%) were male. By March 2014, Bahrain had about 62,200 *Twitter* users. There was, however, more gender parity with *Twitter*, with 44% of users estimated to be women (Salem, 2017). Despite the affordances of these new platforms, which allow for citizen journalism and emerging forms of media expression, the authorities have cracked down heavily on those choosing to criticize the government or institutions of state. Social media are highly monitored and have been weaponized as a tool of state surveillance (Jones, 2013, 2020). Web censorship has been centralized, with Internet service providers instructed to install specific web filtering software to block specific websites. The encrypted messaging app *Telegram* has also been blocked.

Despite the blocking of websites, citizens are still able to use mainstream social media platforms to produce critical content. The years from 2011 to 2013 saw the proliferation of citizen journalism and revolutionary cultural production—all disseminated via *YouTube*, *Twitter*, *Facebook*, and *Instagram*. This marked a shift from traditional online criticism of politics, which mainly centered around messaging boards such as *Online Bahrain* (Jones, 2017). However, those caught engaging in such activities were and continue to be harshly punished.

The Telecommunications Regulatory Authority oversees much of the communication infrastructure in Bahrain. It is also highly responsive to the state security apparatus. The chairman of the board of directors is a member of the ruling family, while the board also includes a major general from the Ministry of the Interior. The government has the ability to localize Internet curfews during times of political unrest and

did so for the village of Duraz for over 100 days starting in June 2016, switching off certain 3G and 4G cell towers between 7 p.m. and 1 a.m. every evening. This allows the government to strictly enforce repressive measures, making the need for wide-scale, nation-wide information control less necessary.

Challenges

Bahrain's media system is very much reflective of its authoritarian ecosystem. With most ministries dominated by members of the ruling family and no substantive democratic representation, it is unlikely that Bahrain's media system will ever be considered free, pluralistic, or critical, so long as the current political system remains in place. Tentative attempts at media pluralization have generally been short-lived, tempered by political crises that provoke reactionary measures by the government. Given Bahrain's regular political crises that tend to flare up every two decades, it is unlikely any liberalization will be sustained. Nonetheless, Bahrain's media environment is considerably more pluralistic than it was. Socially liberal ideas are generally tolerated, yet platforms for political demands are controlled. As such, availability and demand for on-demand streaming services such as *Netflix* have skyrocketed.

Politically, Bahrain's' dependency on Saudi Arabia is also a large contributing factor to the lack of media dynamism in the country. It was Saudi displeasure that was the likely reason for the cancelling of the television channel *Al-Arab*. Despite the political reforms going on in Saudi Arabia under Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), a free media is a long way off. As such, any media reforms that emerge in Bahrain are always going to be hampered by MBS's desire to maintain control of the media's portrayal of the region. Indeed, it was the rise of MBS that was credited with the fact that Qatar's *Al-Jazeera*, one of the Arab world's most popular broadcasters, was blocked in Bahrain, the UAE, Saudi, and Egypt after the aforementioned countries severed political ties with Qatar in 2017.

Outlook

It is expected that Khalifa bin Salman, the country's prime minister and driver of some of Bahrain's most conservative policies, will eventually step down or become unable to continue to exert influence. If significant political influence shifts to his technical successor, Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad, who is widely seen as more progressive, it is possible that there may be a step change in the constitutional makeup of Bahrain, and the inclusivity of the media. However, this will be defined ultimately by external (Saudi) influence.

Most state-funded and private media companies have made efforts to migrate or have a heavy digital presence across social media and through websites. It is unlikely that state media will ever be fully subsumed or replaced by external media content, digital or otherwise. While Bahrainis consume lots of content from abroad, such as through *Netflix*, the government will likely retain its official news outlets for the purpose of propaganda, PR, and crisis communication. The suspension of *Al-Jazeera* highlights the regime's willingness and ability to block content it deems to be threatening or not in line with its political outlook.

Social media sites, while monitored, are likely to remain popular. However, Bahrain's economic need to project an image of neoliberal modernity necessitates the embrace of modern communication technology. Failure to do this would be harmful to the economy. As long as the government maintains the ability to guide, control, and monitor people's consumption of media, the actual availability of platforms, websites, and news content will likely continue to flourish.

References

Al-Rumaihi, E. M. H. (2002). *The development of mass media in the Kingdom of Bahrain* (doctoral thesis). University Exeter.

Amnesty International (2017). *Bahraini Activist Risks 7 years in Jail for Retweets: Yaser Mawali.* https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde11/6825/2017/en/

ARTICLE 19 & Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy (2016, October 4). Joint Submission for the UPR of Bahrain: For consideration at the 27th session of the UN working group in April–May 2017. *Universal Periodic*

Review. https://www.upr-info.org/sites/default/files/document/bahrain/session_27_-_may_2017/js2_upr27_bhr_e_main.pdf

Bassiouni, M. C., Rodley, N., Al-Awadhi, B., Kirsch, P., & Arsanjani, M. H. (2011, November 23). Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry. *BICI*. www.bici.org.bh/BICIreportEN.pdf

Dubai Press Club (2018). *Arab media outlook 2016–2018*: *Youth*, *content*, *digital media*. https://dpc.org.ae/-/media/1adce79686d148a1a98a6e1044156b2e.ashx

Fanack (2016, November 7). *Bahrain's media landscape*: *An overview*. https://fanack.com/bahrain/society-media-culture/media/

Information and eGovernment Authority (2020). *Bahrain open data portal*. https://www.data.gov.bh/

Jones, M. O. (2013). Social media, surveillance and social control in the Bahrain Uprising. *Westminister Papers of Communication and Culture*, *9*(2), 71–91. https://doi.org/10.16997/wpcc.167

——. (2016). Saudi intervention, sectarianism, and de-democratization in Bahrain's uprising. In T. Davies, H. E. Ryan, & A. Milcíades Peña (Eds.), *Protest*, *social movements and global democracy since 2011*: *New perspectives* (Vol. 39) (pp. 251–79). Bingley: Emerald Group Publishing Limited. https://doi.org/10.1108/s0163-786x20160000039011

——. (2020). *Political repression in Bahrain*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

——. (2017). Satire, social media and revolutionary cultural production in the Bahrain uprising: From utopian fiction to political satire. *Communication and the Public*, 2(2), 136–53. https://doi.org/10.1177/2057047317706372

Khalaf, A. (1998, August 12–16). *Contentious politics in Bahrain*: *From ethnic to national and vice versa*. Paper presented at the Fourth Nordic Conference on Middle Eastern Studies: The Middle East in a Globalising World, Oslo, Norway. www.smi.uib.no/pao/khalaf.html

——. (2013, February 28). The Many Afterlives of Lulu. The Story of Bahrain's Pearl Roundabout. *Ibraaz*. https://www.ibraaz.org/essays/56

Lawson, F. H. (2004). Repertoires of contention in contemporary Bahrain. In Q. Wiktorowicz (Ed.), *Islamic activism*: *A social movement theory approach* (pp. 89–111). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Mattar, K. M., & Seikaly, M. (2012). *The Arab Spring*: *Impacts and consequences on the GCC*. http://grm.grc.net/index.php?pgid=Njk=&wid=MjQ=

Ministry of Information Affairs (2020). FAQ. https://www.mia.gov.bh/the-ministry/faq-ar/?lang=en

Ministry of Interior (2019, May 30). Anti-cybercrime: Those who follow inciting accounts that promote sedition and circulate their posts will be held legally accountable [Tweet]. https://twitter.com/moi_bahrain/status/1134148380312178689

Monroe, S. L. (2012). Salafis in Parliament: Democratic attitudes and party politics in the Gulf. *Middle East Journal*, *66*(3), 409–24. https://doi. org/10.3751/66.3.11

Monroe, W. T. (2006, May 24). Bahraini political scene part II: Royal family conservatives tighten reins on politics. *WikiLeaks*. https://wikileaks.org/ plusd/cables/06MANAMA907_a.html

Nakhleh, E. (2011). *Bahrain*: *Political Development in a Modernizing Society*. New York: Lexington Books.

Project on a Middle East Democracy (2012, November 12). *One year later*: *Assessing Bahrain's implementations of the BICI report*. http://pomed.org/wp-content/ uploads/2013/12/One-Year-Later-Assessing-Bahrains-Implementation-of-the-BICI-Report.pdf

Salem, F. (2017). *The Arab social media report 2017*: *Social media and the Internet of Things*: *Towards data-driven policymaking in the Arab World* (Vol. 7). Dubai: MBR School of Government. https://www.mbrsg.ae/ getattachment/1383b88a-6eb9-476a-bae4-61903688099b/Arab-Social-Media-Report-2017

Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (2018). *TRA annual report*. https:// www.tra.org.bh/Media/Interactive_Annual_Reports/2018/en/index. html#page29

Toumi, H. (2007, April 8). Bahrain to air first private TV channel. *Gulf News*. https://gulfnews.com/world/gulf/bahrain/bahrain-to-air-first-private-tv-channel-1.171527

Universal Periodic Review (2017a). *27th session*, *April-May 2017*, *contribution of UNESCO to compilation of U.N. information* (*to Part I. A. and to Part III – F*, *J*, *K*, *and P*): *Bahrain*. https://www.upr-info.org/sites/default/files/document/ bahrain/session_27_-_may_2017/unesco_upr27_bhr_e_main.pdf

Universal Periodic Review (2017b). *UPR submission of the UNCT in Bahrain*. https://www.upr-info.org/sites/default/files/document/bahrain/session_ 27_-_may_2017/js0_upr27_bhr_e_main.pdf