

Global Communications

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Arab Media Systems





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10. Kuwait: From “Hollywood of the Gulf” to Social Media Diwaniyas

Fatima Alsalem

The media in Kuwait is relatively free and includes a wide variety of platforms expressing disparate views in a unique, competitive culture. The press in Kuwait has always been privately-owned by influential elites, allowing for wide range of opinion expression, but it has been limited to some degree by censorship and media laws. Nevertheless, the press exerts a strong influence on public opinion. Private broadcast media emerged in 2004 when the state ban was removed. Although private television and radio stations enjoy a fair amount of freedom in Kuwait, especially when compared with other Gulf states, they are subject to government laws and regulations.

Background

Kuwait is one of the smallest countries in the Middle East, located adjacent to the northwest corner of the Arabian Gulf, with an area of 17,818 square kilometers. The country shares borders with Iraq and Saudi Arabia and enjoys a significant and important commercial status in the region due to its strategic location, natural passage to the northeast corner of the Arabian Peninsula, and, of course, its vast oil resources. The country has a desert-like climate, and a population of 4.1 million, including approximately 30% Kuwaiti citizens and 70% non-Kuwaiti nationals (World Population Review, 2019). Although

English is widely spoken, the official language of Kuwait is Arabic. The population is 85% Muslim, with Protestant and Catholic Christians, Hindu and other religions combined to account for the remaining 15%. At 96%, the literacy rate in Kuwait is one of the highest in the world due to the government's expenditure on education and the country's free educational system. Kuwait can be viewed as the most democratic country in the Gulf region. Compared with other Gulf countries, it has a thriving democratic society with a democratic government. It is a constitutional hereditary monarchy ruled by descendants of the Al-Sabah family. Nonetheless, the legislative branch is democratically elected by Kuwaiti males and females over 21 years of age. Women gained the right to participate in elections and vote in 2006. Since women received the right to vote, almost all Kuwaitis vote; only military personnel are excluded.

Kuwait had been, for many centuries, an independent sheikhdom living on trade, fishing, and pearl harvesting. In the early eighteenth century, tribes such as Al-Utub and Al-Sabah fled to Kuwait from the Arabian Peninsula, away from danger and dispute with other tribes. After they had settled in the town of Kuwait, the small town developed into a commercial hub and began to thrive because of its location overlooking the head of the Arabian Gulf. This led Kuwait to become one of the most prosperous countries in the region. The Al-Utub and Al-Sabah tribes voted for Sabah bin Jaber Al-Sabah as their leader, or "governor," in 1762. Although Kuwait has been ruled by 15 different rulers since its establishment by the Al-Sabah family, Sheikh Mubarak Al-Sabah (1896–1915) is seen as the founder of the modern Kuwaiti state. After being threatened with occupation by the Ottoman Empire, Mubarak Al-Sabah signed an agreement with the British, and Kuwait became a British protectorate from 1899 to 1961.

After the discovery of oil and the beginning of its export in the middle of the twentieth century, Kuwait City and its villages witnessed a great urban renaissance. In addition, the country experienced a period of stability and prosperity driven by the oil resources and its liberal atmosphere. This was a turning point in the history of Kuwait. By 1952, the country had become the largest oil exporter in the Gulf, and this attracted many foreign workers to the state.

In 1961, Kuwait declared its independence from Britain and called for elections for a constituent assembly, tasking it with drafting a new constitution (Salem, 2007). The assembly, however, was not the first of its kind in Kuwait. The democratic experience before Kuwait's independence had major influences on the significant changes in its social and political life. The first elected legislative council was established in June 1938—with 150 voting members from elite families—for the purpose of advising the ruler on such matters as the creation of the economic and educational systems and the taxation system as well as the drafting of the first constitution. Kuwait is specific in the Arab region because of the participatory style of governing between the ruling family and the people, and it was among the first to draft a constitution and form an elected parliament, which it did in 1962. Although the constitution limited some legislative powers, it guaranteed civil liberties, such as equality, freedom of expression, and freedom of the press.

After independence, the government supported a democratic constitution that granted significant power to the legislative branch (Kuwait National Assembly, 2019). Its constitution and the elected parliament set Kuwait apart as a political model and has inspired many countries in the Gulf and beyond to take similar measures (Asiri, 2007). The participatory political system in Kuwait strengthened people's political orientation and their interest in politics. This is reflected in the growing number of registered voters, a relatively high voter turnout, and the advanced nature of Kuwaiti elections' advertising campaigns.

There are several sociocultural, political, and economic factors that have influenced Kuwaiti citizens to become more politically active compared with those in many Arab nations. First, there are the sociocultural factors related to the country's original organization, which was based on tribal and Bedouin families. The tribal system enhanced political participation early in the country's establishment when the three main power factors in the country (politics, business trading, sea trading) were divided among the leaders of the three main tribes. This suggests that the idea of participatory governance was embedded early in Kuwait's history.

Historical Developments

Kuwait enjoys a more outspoken and critical media environment than most other nations in the Arab world. There is unrestricted news accessibility in Kuwait, with a large amount of media freedom that ranks the country as a “partly free” press system and the only Gulf country represented in this category (Freedom House, 2019). Thus, Kuwait’s media may be described as one of the most open media systems in the Middle East due to its diversity and early emergence. In particular, from the 1960s through the 1980s, Kuwaiti media became one of the most developed and influential media systems in the Middle East.

Yet, the Kuwaiti press was established rather late compared with the emergence of the first Arab newspaper in Egypt in the early nineteenth century. The Kuwaiti press began not as a government tool but as private endeavors (Al-Rasheed & Chenoufi, 2008). In February 1928, Abdulaziz Al-Rasheed published the first Kuwaiti magazine, *Majalat Al-Kuwait*. Although it did not last long and closed down after two years of publication, a new newspaper was published in 1947 by the House of Kuwait (student union) in Cairo, under the name of *Al-Bitha*. *Al-Bitha* played a prominent cultural role for the Kuwaiti students in Cairo as it covered news from the country and gave students the opportunity to express their viewpoints on political and social affairs. *Al-Arabi* magazine, one of the leading cultural magazines in the region, was established in December 1958 when the Kuwaiti government decided to publish a magazine concerned with Arab cultural affairs. Since its initial publication, *Al-Arabi* magazine has been keen to discuss Arab and international developments and cultural issues. The magazine has been a pioneer publication for leading Arab writers, poets, intellectual elites, and scholars, including Taha Hussain, Abbas Al-Akkad, Najib Mahfouz, Nizar Al-Qabbani, Abdel Hadi Tazi, Ihsan Abbas, Youssef Idris, Salah Abdel Sabour, Jaber Asfour, Farouk Shousha, and others. Since the publication of the first issue more than 50 years ago, *Al-Arabi* has become a cultural Arab symbol and has succeeded in introducing a new form of cultural magazine.

During World War II, only a few people in Kuwait owned radio devices, yet Kuwaitis used to gather in *diwanias* (cultural halls) to tune in to radio stations such as the *BBC*, *Radio Cairo*, and *Radio Baghdad*.

Inspired by this experience, Mubarak Al-Mayal, who served in the military, suggested using an old radio transmission device owned by the Ministry of Interior and the Kuwaiti military to set up a new radio station with the help of a Pakistani technician, Mohammed Khan (Al-Enezi, 2015).

“This is Kuwait” were the first words broadcast on-air, spoken by Mubarak Al-Mayal to announce the establishment of Kuwaiti radio on 12 May 1951. Since then, Kuwait has taken serious steps to develop the station and introduce more diversified programs, while also extending the transmission time. In the 1960s, radio played a vital role in Kuwaiti lives during the period of independence. Radio has also played a leading role in guiding Kuwaiti public opinion, spreading the spirit of patriotism and national pride, for example, during Iraq’s threats to Kuwait’s independence in the 1960s.

Television emerged in 1951 and was privately-owned by a local Radio Corporation of America (RCA) television dealer who wanted to promote television set sales. Later, the Emir of Kuwait, Sheikh Abdullah Al-Salem Al-Sabah, bought the television transmission from RCA to bring it under government control. Official broadcasting started on 15 November 1961, and *Kuwait TV* became one of the earliest television stations broadcasting in the Arab world after the emergence of television in Lebanon, Iraq, and Egypt and was the first and only broadcast operator in the Gulf region.

The Ministry of Information continued to develop *Kuwait TV* and bought the first outdoor shooting cameras and equipment in the region. The cameras attracted many Arab artists to Kuwait to shoot their music videos. This made the archive of *Kuwait TV* one of the most substantial visual libraries in the region.

Initially, *Kuwait TV* broadcast its programs in black and white for four hours a day until mid-March of 1974. In 1974, color broadcasting began, followed by the grand opening of the new television building in the Ministry of Information complex in February 1979.

At that time, television sets were costly, and citizens who were able to afford them shared their viewing with family and neighbors. Kuwaiti families who owned television sets used to have home cinema style gatherings where neighbors and friends gathered to watch shows and television series.

Kuwait TV soon became the leading broadcaster in the Gulf and many of its programs and soap operas were broadcast abroad. Since its emergence, *Kuwait TV* has been considered one of the best and has competed with Egyptian television, which was considered the leader at that time. During the 1970s and 1980s *Kuwait TV* produced the top dramas and shows in the region. At that time, most of the Gulf states did not have the infrastructure necessary for television broadcasting; thus, the Kuwaiti government opened a branch of *Kuwait TV* in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), sending content and programs daily by air for UAE viewers. The leadership role of Kuwait television was not limited to helping other GCC countries establish their television. It also produced television dramas (soap operas) that aired in all Arab countries. The 1980s marked Kuwaiti drama's golden age, and Kuwait was named "Hollywood of the Gulf" due to the international popularity of its soap operas and theatre. This led many Gulf and Arab actors and performers to settle in Kuwait to establish their professional careers.

The state took serious steps to improve the media technically and financially. However, the Iran-Iraq war during the 1980s and, in particular, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the subsequent war in 1990–1991, resulted in an economic crisis which affected media development in Kuwait. Iraq bombed the Ministry of Information building as soon as it occupied Kuwait in an attempt to control the media and obscure the reality of what was happening. The attack on the Ministry's building broke down the radio transmitters. However, shortly after the breakdown of the official radio transmission in the country, Kuwaitis rushed to transmit radio broadcasts from a military camp before moving to a new studio in the Dasma residential area and transmitting their broadcasts from Failaka Island. The transmission lasted only two days before the Iraqi army found out about the transmission in Failaka and closed it down. However, Kuwaiti media did not stop at that point but decided to continue to broadcast from Khafji in Saudi Arabia and Cairo, Egypt. During the invasion, Kuwaitis also launched the international radio station *Sawt Al-Kuwait* to address Kuwaitis at home and in the world. *Sawt Al-Kuwait* station, which aired from a secret site, helped Kuwaitis stay connected, voice their opinions, and support the legitimacy of the government.

However, after Kuwait was liberated in 1991, a rebuilding process took place based on a new and modern foundation. This process required a lot of effort because the invading troops had taken or damaged all the production equipment, including cameras, studios, tape recorders, and the archives, resulting in damage estimated to be USD 150 million.

Political System and Legal Framework

During the second half of the twentieth century, Kuwait faced many political challenges that led to an ambivalent stance towards media and the freedom of expression. Since its establishment in 1963, the National Assembly has been dissolved eight times and early elections have been called for due to the impasse between the legislature and the government (Shayji, 2009).

The continued conflict between the executive and the legislative branches has led to an increase in politically active movements in the country. For example, activist youth groups, opposition members of the government, and some members of parliament joined in a broad-based movement named “nabeha khams” (“We Want It Five”) in 2006, which aimed to shrink the number of electoral districts from 25 to 5, in order to minimize corruption in the voting system. This campaign involved street demonstrations, rallies, blog posts, and text messages, leading the government to call for new elections within a few weeks. In 2011, the opposition coalition also campaigned against the prime minister and his cabinet to end corruption in the National Assembly. The campaign, known as “irhal” (“Leave”), utilized many digital media tools, including *YouTube* videos, social media tools, and text messages.

More recently, Emir Sabah Al-Ahmed Al-Jaber Al-Sabah issued a decree that amended the basic electoral law and decreased the number of votes allowed per person from four to one in elections for the National Assembly. The old voting system was perceived to enforce the tribal system, because people were used to electing a slate rather than dividing their votes among a larger group of candidates. Therefore, the new voting system of “one person, one vote” was thought to favor the less well-organized and more liberal Kuwaiti families. In a reaction to the Emir’s voting amendment, a coalition of young people, Sunni Islamists, tribal activists, and some liberals staged demonstrations, rallies, political

speeches, and sit-ins to campaign against the new voting system (Central Intelligence Agency, 2019). Campaigns, such as “karamat watan” (“The Nation’s Dignity”) or “kate’a” (“Boycott”), used *Twitter*, *Instagram*, and *YouTube* as mobilization platforms for their election boycott campaigns. However, the supporters of the voting amendment also ran a political campaign on social media to raise the public’s awareness of the importance of voting as a civic duty. The “s’osharek” (“I’m Going to Participate”) campaign, for example, was organized by pro-government activists, former members of parliament, political candidates, and activists. The main objective of this campaign was to call for participation in support of the government and the sovereignty of the constitution.

This active political sphere in Kuwait and the challenging relationship between Kuwaitis and their government have influenced the status of the media in the country. On the one hand, parts of the elite and the public have demanded a greater role in the democratic process by newspaper ownership and media influence. On the other hand, the Kuwaiti government continuously tries to impose control over the media. For example, the Kuwaiti government had imposed a total ban on issuing licenses for new newspaper publications since the mid-1970s, leaving only five daily newspapers (owned and managed by elite business families) to operate until a change of the law in 2006. The total ban of newspaper licenses was imposed by the government to help them control, deal with, and censor their content. This ban, however, has resulted in Kuwaiti newspaper journalists facing pressure not from direct government control but from newspaper owners’ personal relationships with government officials. The close relationship that elite families and newspaper owners have with the government makes it difficult to freely criticize the government due to shared interests and fear of losing economic benefits from the government. In a television interview that was aired on *Kuwait TV 1* in 2016, *Al-Qabas* newspaper’s editor-in-chief, Waleed Al-Nusif, admitted that owning a newspaper in Kuwait brings significant power and influence to the families that own them. In the same interview, he said that newspapers do not represent the whole society, although they “claim” they do, but their owners’ goals and interests do limit them. Nevertheless, Kuwaiti newspapers criticize the government organizations. In fact, newspapers are free for the most part to publish what they want, but only in accordance with the Press and Publications

Law (Dashti & Fadhli, 2011). However, newspapers tend to respect and follow the country's political strategies and principles and, therefore, support the country's policy, especially in its international affairs and relations.

In 2006, the Kuwaiti government passed a revision of the Press and Publication Law of 1961. It provided several reforms, including the government's agreement to allow the publication of new daily newspapers, which ended the publication ban that had lasted three decades. Still, newspaper publishers are required to obtain an operating license from the Ministry of Information. The new law no longer classifies press offenses as crimes to be sanctioned with imprisonment, yet offenders can be charged with fines. The Press and Publication Law has also set limits to certain types of criticism, such as criticizing the Emir, scrutinizing Islam, or publishing information related to the national security. Violating these limits can result in criminal charges against the author and the editor-in-chief of the newspaper.

The Internet is considered to be a relatively free medium in Kuwait and is protected by freedom of expression in Articles 36 and 37 of the Kuwaiti Constitution. Although the Internet is a means of communication and information, it is not regulated by the Ministry of Information but rather by the Communication and Information Technology Regulatory Authority (CITRA) under the supervision of the Ministry of Communication. Internet Despite the protection of freedom of expression by the Kuwaiti constitution, CITRA routinely blocks websites suspected of terrorism or inciting political instability and monitors Internet communication for defamation and security threats (Freedom House, 2019). Regardless of some government control on social media users, most Kuwaitis have unfiltered access to the Internet. Unrestricted social media use makes sense in a country that allows for a greater degree of freedom of expression than other countries in the GCC.

Economy and Ownership Patterns

Ownership in Kuwait can be characterized by a mix of limited privatization and governmental control. As for the press, since its emergence in the 1920s and expansion in the 1960s, Kuwait's newspapers have been entirely individually owned. This means that newspapers

are owned by influential individuals of elite families in the Kuwaiti society, family partnerships, or joint stock organizations (Abu Shanab, 1987). Although profits are the main objective for the establishment of a newspaper in Kuwait, it has proven to provide other benefits to its owners, such as political and social influence (Abu Shanab, 1987).

Today, there are a total of 13 Arabic daily newspapers and three English dailies in Kuwait (Ministry of Information, 2019). The five newspapers that operated before the new press law in 2006 are still considered to be the most influential and include *Al-Rai* that started publication 1961, *Al-Seyasah* founded in 1965, *Al-Qabas* founded in 1972, *Al-Watan* which started publication in 1974, and *Al-Anbaa* founded in 1976.

When it comes to radio, Kuwaiti radio offers nine specialized English and Arabic stations that are owned and managed by the Ministry of Information, including *Al-Qur'an Al-Kareem*, *Super-station*, *Kuwait Radio One*, *OFM*, *Traditional Station*, *The Old Arabic Singing*, *Easy*, and *Kuwait Radio Two* (Ministry of Information, 2019). Private radio emerged in 2005 after the state domination of broadcast radio and television was eased by a ministerial order. Radio stations, such *Marina FM* and *Nabth Al-Kuwait* which are owned by the private sector, have changed the game. The government permission of private radio stations initiated competition which enriched the quality of the programs and professionalism of their presenters. Also, the emergence of private radio has increased advertising spending on this platform. Before private radio stations, advertisers had no great interest in radio because it was considered a government entity whose purpose was not to generate revenue. The establishment of private radio stations led the government to issue an Audio and Visual Media Law in 2007 to control and manage the private stations.

Similar to radio, the Kuwaiti government removed the state ban on private television in 2004 and granted the first television license to *Al-Rai TV*, followed by *Al-Watan TV* and *Funoon TV*, all owned by Kuwaiti business families, allowing for greater freedom and diversity of choice. The television licenses allowed the private sector to begin commercial broadcasting. The first private television, *Al-Rai TV*, followed by *Al-Watan*, offered daily news, documentaries, popular movies, talk shows, and late-night shows that gained huge popularity in the Kuwaiti

society. Although the government permitted the establishment of private television, new private operators needed to obtain media licenses from the Ministry of Information and sign a consent form agreeing to obey the law and abstain from shows that would “undermine public modesty.” Yet, state-owned television remains dominant, and the Ministry of Information broadcasts eight diversified satellite television channels, which also stream live on its website as well as through an Internet application that enables live television streaming on mobile phones (Ministry of Information, 2019). The eight channels are *KTV1*, *KTV2*, *KTV Sports*, *KTV Ethra*, *KTV Arabe*, *Al-Qurain*, *KTV Sports Plus*, and *KTV Al-Majlis*.

Technology and Infrastructure

Kuwait ranks first in terms of Internet penetration in the Middle East (followed by United Arab Emirates) with 100% of the population having access to the Internet. There are various economic and political reasons for such a high level of Internet penetration in Kuwait. In addition to bilingual education, which allows Kuwaitis to easily navigate the Internet, Kuwait’s gross domestic product per capita is very high, and as a result, most Kuwaitis can easily afford to buy the latest Internet-enabled communication technologies and maintain Internet subscriptions.

The Kuwaiti government has taken serious steps towards the development of its e-government services and social media presence. The government has implemented laws and strategies to manage and control Internet service providers’ prices and the quality of their service. In 2012, for example, the Ministry of Communication issued a regulation that limited the maximum cost of an Internet subscription, reducing the fees of some providers by at least 40%. The main objective of the law was to maintain high quality and efficient services.

Another factor for the high Internet penetration in Kuwait is the high degree of mobile phone penetration in the country. Kuwaitis’ ability to purchase smartphones enhances their Internet accessibility and use of social media. A study of university students in Kuwait concluded that nearly 100% of participants already had Internet access at home in 2010, while more than 75% had Internet access on their mobile phones (Wheeler & Mintz, 2010). Statistics also show that Kuwait’s mobile

phone penetration had reached 179% as of 2018, indicating that nearly every Kuwaiti has two mobile phones. A report also determined that 100% of land area and population is covered by mobile networks, while the 4G LTE network has a 97% coverage according to the Consolidated Kuwait national ICT indicators report of 2016. Thus, the high mobile phone penetration in Kuwait fosters Internet usage as many Kuwaitis access the Internet and social media sites through their smartphones.

Statistics show that local Kuwaiti social media users prefer *Twitter* (73% of Internet users) over *Facebook* (41%). As for the expat community, figures differ with 88% of the Asian expats and 97% of the Arab expats using *Facebook*. *Twitter* is only used by 52% of the Arab expats and 35% of Asian expats living in Kuwait based on figures from the Consolidated Kuwait national ICT indicators report of 2016. *Twitter* gained great popularity in Kuwait and became an integral platform for political discussions and debate. Although Kuwait led the world in terms of *Twitter* penetration rate in 2014 (Saleh, 2016), it has been affected by government restrictions and electronic criminal laws which made users more aware of and practice self-censorship when engaging in political debate and criticism. Still, *Twitter* has been an important outlet for public opinion in Kuwait and political campaigning, and many government officials use *Twitter* for their press releases and as a tool for crisis management.

Instagram had 1.7 million users as of September 2018, and statistics show that nearly 93% of Kuwaitis were using the platform, while approximately 70% of Arab expats used it (CAIT, 2016). *Instagram* has gained great popularity in Kuwait and changed the way people shop for and advertise their products. People use it as an electronic storefront where they advertise their businesses, selling anything and everything (Greenfield, 2013). Also, *Instagram's* boom in Kuwait is linked to social media influencers who use this site for their daily life by blogging and having live chats with their followers.

Social media created a new media reality in Kuwait, one that offers a greater space for public debate and discussions of political events. Few can deny that social media have become an essential political tool in Kuwait and that Kuwaitis' use of social networking sites has been described as the most "intriguing" in the Gulf region (Al-Qassemi, 2011). This is because of the effective use of social networking sites for

participating in political discussions, grilling parliament members, and holding heated political debates. Scholars such as Wheeler and Mintz (2010) have argued that the citizens in Kuwait see a potential for political change through the Internet, and some recent usage trends indicate that social media are contributing effectively to the latest political movements in the country by enabling political mobilization and discussion.

Interestingly, a tradition that materialized in the so-called *diwaniyas*, and stimulated high levels of interpersonal communication among citizens, offers one explanation for the political implications of social media. Traditionally, *diwaniyas* have been male social clubs, which also provided their members with an opportunity for political organization and mobilization. *Diwaniyas* were usually held in either halls attached to Kuwaiti houses or a separate building with a hall to receive guests, neighbors, and friends to discuss current events and exchange views. Even today, *diwaniyas* have preserved their importance and remain an essential part of the social, political, and economic life in Kuwait.

However, contemporary *diwaniyas* have become more like political salons and cultural clubs; they are more organized and often feature planned events, specific topics of discussions, and guest speakers. However, it is still not widely accepted for women to join *diwaniyas*. A member of the ruling family, Rasha Al-Sabah, has held mixed *diwaniyas* where men and women sit together to discuss politics and several other issues. Similarly, Rula Dashti, a former minister and a former member of parliament in the Kuwaiti government, held female-only *diwaniyas* before her official appointment and, as a consequence, normalized the *diwaniya* culture for women (Tétreault, 2012). Najla Al-Naqi (lawyer) and Ghadeer Asiri (professor and social activist) also frequently hold mixed cultural gatherings, which are similar to the *diwaniya* concept, to discuss political and social issues and to invite guest speakers and the press.

At the same time, the emergence of social media is supplementing the traditional role of the *diwaniyas*. Studies have shown that the introduction of the Internet has affected *diwaniya* attendance negatively and that many young people would rather use the Internet than visit *diwaniyas* (Wheeler, 2003). However, it could be argued that the use of social media in Kuwait has become an extension of the *diwaniyas*, where people can interact with politicians and opinion leaders online, discuss politics among themselves, or simply express their opinions.

Thus, Kuwaitis' high level of engagement on social media might be described as "virtual" *diwanis*, where public opinion is formed, news and political information are exchanged, and political opinions are expressed.

Although the social media sphere is active in Kuwait and is seen as a hub for political participation and expression in the Gulf, it faces many challenges and hurdles. In 2016, the government issued Cyber Crimes Law No. 63 which was approved by the National Assembly and contains 21 articles that aim to regulate online activities in Kuwait. Articles 4, 6, and 7 of the Cyber Crimes Law have concerned many activists and human rights advocates around the world. These articles could be used to limit freedom of expression on social media and could as well target online activists and online journalists. The law imposes severe restrictions on freedom of speech and allows the government to police online activities due to its vague and unclear terms. Therefore, this law can be described as a black point in Kuwait's history of freedom of speech.

Challenges

Since Kuwait's independence in 1961 and the subsequent establishment of the constitution, Kuwaiti media have enjoyed a great amount of freedom unlike the media in many other Arab countries. The press, for example, has never been owned by the government, but is instead censored and regulated by laws. Therefore, the government has to go to court if it wants to take an action or revoke a license. However, critics have argued that going to court causes a lot of trouble for the government and provides extra publicity for the publication. Thus, Kuwaiti media, to some extent, criticize the government, and most newspapers publish opinion articles and editorials that encourage public dialogue and provide topics for discussion in the *diwanis*. There is no doubt that tight censorship and government control of the media would lead to resistance and political unrest, and as control is less tight than in other countries, Kuwait remained relatively calm during the Arab uprisings in 2011 because opposition views were absorbed rather than silenced. The Kuwaiti media created an open political arena for the exchange of opinions and allowed criticism. However, with the exception of a few cases, the Kuwaiti press has always practiced a degree of self-discipline and self-censorship to avoid clashing

with the government. Nevertheless, this self-censorship has its price and has affected the quality of journalism.

Today, as in many other countries, newspaper readership is declining in Kuwait and many newspapers are budget cutting in their operations by shrinking the number of pages or by laying off their journalists and employees. The decline in newspaper readership cannot go unnoticed or be denied. Many newspapers have started to disseminate their printed editions for free in governmental institutions, banks, and supermarkets in order to gain higher numbers in their circulation and readership. Also, newspapers have discontinued publishing on Saturdays in order to lower their expenses. Furthermore, the Internet and free news accessibility via social media have affected advertising revenue of newspapers. Many advertisers (the main source of revenue for Kuwaiti newspapers) have redirected their newspaper spending to social media advertising and other outlets such as influencers' endorsements. In addition, social media and online sources have provided uncensored news and publish more freely, which has affected journalism in Kuwait to a great degree.

Other challenges the Kuwaiti media face are those related to the press law and the Ministry of Information's direct control and management of broadcasting. The 2006 Press and Publication Law is seen as an improvement on the old law because of new press licensing and the ban on journalists' imprisonment without final court orders. However, the new law still limits what Kuwait's 1962 constitution guarantees, freedom of expression and freedom of the press. Moreover, the government proposed some amendments to the 2006 Press and Publication Law in 2010, an action that was described by legal experts as making a law that was somewhat strict into a very restrictive one. Some people have argued that the law will not necessarily stop people from writing but will make them lose their motivation to do so. Moreover, it is important to note that censorship is tolerated in Kuwait and expected as a form of civic responsibility. This civic responsibility makes journalists feel that they are protectors of the state, resulting in a culture of self-censorship to protect national security. On the other hand, broadcast media face tighter control mechanisms than print journalism in Kuwait because of their mass audience features, and the state has mostly continued its dominance in this sector.

In August 2020, the National Assembly approved several amendments to the Press and Publication Law that lifted the Ministry of Information's control over and censorship of publications, mainly books, imported into the country. These amendments have been seen as an important step towards more media freedom after years of fierce battle and the banning of 5,000 books over the last seven years. However, many people argue that this end to the Ministry of Information's control over publications has simply shifted the power of censorship and control from the executive branch to the judicial branch.

Outlook

The further development of Kuwaiti media will require major media policy reforms. Kuwaiti media need a structural independence from the government and the parliament so that their television professionals, journalists, and program producers can act more freely and express their creativity without government control and censorship. Although newspaper ownership is privately organized, papers are still bound by hidden government rules and regulations. Therefore, unconditional freedom of the press in Kuwait is necessary in order to further develop journalism and its practices.

The media industry in Kuwait has been highly influenced by the rapid technological developments. Digital media is taking over traditional media, and many daily newspapers have closed down, while others have introduced augmented and virtual reality news stories in addition to their digital newspapers. Nevertheless, the media are facing huge challenges in terms of revenue due to the social media advertising boom and the dominance of influencer marketing. Moreover, media platforms are trying very hard to catch up with the people's changing habits of media consumption and the emerging new trends in mobile media. In the end, technology alone cannot make a successful media unless it is creative and content rich. Despite the fact that Kuwaiti media are adopting the latest technologies, freedom of expression remains an essential factor for their development. Kuwait needs an independent regulator that can manage and regulate Kuwaiti media. In addition, Kuwaiti media must increase their transparency and reduce the Ministry of Information's control and management of their content.

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