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FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

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Saudi Arabia

[Saudi Arabia](#)[Freedom of the Press 2013](#)

The media environment in Saudi Arabia remained among the most repressive in the world in 2012. Article 39 of the Basic Law of 1992 does not guarantee freedom of the press, and certain provisions of the law allow authorities to exercise broad powers to prevent any act that may lead to disunity or sedition. It also prohibits publishing materials that harm national security or that “detract from a man’s dignity.” The 2000 Press and Publications Act governs the establishment of media outlets and stipulates penalties for press violations, such as fines and imprisonment. Under Royal Decree 1700/Mim Ba, issued in March 2005, jurisdiction over the media was transferred from the court system to the Ministry of Culture and Information, which is authorized to shut down any media outlet that it finds to have violated the press law. In April 2011, as uprisings across the Middle East and North Africa gained momentum, the monarchy issued a decree banning the reporting of news that contradicts Sharia (Islamic law), undermines national security, promotes foreign interests, or slanders religious leaders. The decree also amended several articles of the 2000 press law, allowing authorities to impose lifetime professional bans on journalists and levy fines of up

to \$133,000 for violations of the law. Other amendments barred publication of anything harmful to the state or covering trials without first obtaining permission from judicial authorities. An antiterrorism bill proposed in July 2011 included a minimum 10-year prison sentence for “questioning the integrity” of the king or crown prince. The bill was still pending at the end of 2012.

Defamation is a criminal offense. Furthermore, any form of expression that insults or blasphemes Islam is punishable by death, as is the crime of apostasy. In February 2012, 23-year-old Saudi journalist and blogger Hamza Kashgari was deported to Saudi Arabia from Malaysia to face trial and a potential death sentence over microblog posts that allegedly insulted the prophet Muhammad. Kashgari remained in prison and his case was still pending at year’s end.

According to the official media policy, the press should be a tool to educate the masses, propagate government views, and promote national unity. The government has been known to directly censor both local and international media, and journalists routinely practice self-censorship and avoid criticism of the royal family, Islam, or religious authorities. Nevertheless, journalists have increasingly tested the boundaries of permissible reporting.

Many Saudis have turned to the internet to express political opinions and expose government corruption. However, the government is able to monitor and block websites with relative ease, since all internet traffic is routed through a proxy located in the state-run King Abdulaziz City for Science & Technology. The government aggressively blocks websites it considers “immoral,” the majority of which are pornographic, as well as sites deemed critical of the government by the Interior Ministry. Other politically sensitive websites are routinely blocked, including those associated with the country’s disadvantaged Shiite Muslim minority. Several websites sympathetic to Shiites were shut down in February 2012. Habib Ali al-Maatiq and Hussein Malik al-Salam were arrested and held without charge after the news website they managed, Al-Fajr Cultural Network, covered protests by demonstrators calling for reform in the predominantly Shiite Eastern Province. The website was shut down by the authorities. Al-Awamia, another news site that provided coverage of demonstrations in Eastern Province, was similarly shut down, and its editor, Jalal Mohamed al-Jamal, was arrested without charge. Also in February, Saudi Arabia blocked the official website of Iran’s supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. The government routinely censors online expression that it views as blasphemous. In September, following nationwide

protests against the anti-Islam film *The Innocence of Muslims*, the U.S.-based video-sharing site YouTube granted a request by the Saudi government to block access to the film in the kingdom.

In October, the Saudi government petitioned the UN World Telecommunications Policy Forum to create a new international body tasked with regulating the internet, stating, “There is a crying need for international collaboration to address ‘freedom of expression’ which clearly disregards public order.” At year’s end, the United Nations had not responded to the Saudi request.

There were relatively few cases of physical harassment of journalists in 2012. However, reporters frequently face difficulty covering the news, especially when trying to access Eastern Province, where protests and arrests are frequent and no local or foreign journalists are allowed to enter. In April, human rights activist and writer Mikhilif bin Daham al-Shammari was banned from leaving the country for 10 years after publishing an article that criticized what he asserted was prejudice by Sunni Muslim religious scholars against members of the Shiite minority and their beliefs. At year’s end, al-Shammari was still on trial for a range of charges, including attempting to harm the reputation of the kingdom in international media, communicating with suspect organizations, and accusing state organs of corruption.

There are 13 daily newspapers in Saudi Arabia. All are privately owned but controlled by individuals affiliated with the royal family. Members of the royal family also control two popular London-based dailies, *Asharq al-Aswat* and *Al-Hayat*, that serve a wider Arab audience. Broadcast media are controlled by the government, which owns and operates all terrestrial television and radio stations. Since 2011, the government has required all online newspapers and bloggers to obtain a special license from the Ministry of Culture and Information. Although satellite dishes are illegal, satellite television has become widespread and is an important source of foreign news. However, key regional satellite channels, including the popular Al-Arabiya news channel, are controlled by Saudi investors and adhere to local media norms.

Internet penetration in Saudi Arabia was about 54 percent in 2012. The country was ranked first globally in the proportion of mobile telephone users, with a phone-to-population ratio of 188 percent, according to a report by the UN Conference on Trade and Development. Saudi Arabia also ranked first in the total number of daily YouTube views, according to Google, the site’s owner.

2013 SCORES

PRESS STATUS

Not Free

PRESS FREEDOM SCORE

84

LEGAL ENVIRONMENT

29

POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

30

ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT

25

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