

International Media and Local Programming: The Case of Kuwait

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Abstract

The last decade has witnessed the acceleration of the phenomenon of media systems going global. Whereas media entities had previously relied on a national audience, going global has promised exposure to an increasingly diverse and sophisticated subscriber base. Although globalization is not a new occurrence, the global presence of media and its targeting of an international audience is a relatively new one. Particularly in the last two decades, media entities have increasingly targeted an international audience as a means of extending their reach and influence. While global media systems now have the ability to distribute media content to a worldwide audience, this phenomenon has undoubtedly created some concerns, especially in small markets such as Kuwait in the Gulf. This study will examine the proliferation of international programming in Kuwaiti film and television. The results will show that while non-Kuwaiti, primarily U.S., content dominates movie theaters, Kuwaiti television preserves a stronger sense of national identity through its programming, thus showing the limits of globalization on local media markets.

Introduction

In the last two decades or so, media systems have been able to transcend national boundaries and to export their products to an international audience. Media corporations have targeted international audiences as a means to spread their influence and clout. Gilboa (2005) commented that the establishment of CNN in the early 1980s had a profound effect on global communications and that its around-the-clock coverage inspired others such as the BBC and NBC to aspire to a global television presence. This shift has come from the realization that local markets no longer generate enough profits.

The advent of globalization as a world system has accelerated the spread of media entities to the international stage. This study will examine media content in Kuwait, specifically film screenings and television broadcasts. It will examine the percentage of international programming in both film and television as a means of measuring the dominance or lack thereof of foreign media entities on Kuwaiti media outlets. The study will also provide a framework for future studies of media content in a country like Kuwait and how its own media content fares in comparison to international media content. Kuwait is a small country – both in territory and in population – and its national media is not renowned for producing content aimed at a global audience. In addition, Kuwait's national media, for a number of reasons, is not able to produce

content that satisfies all the tastes of its local market which is saturated with the non-Kuwaiti and non-Arabic speaking nationalities of its foreign workers. This leaves the country more susceptible to international media content in some areas (film), but protective of its local content in others (television).

Globalization and the Media

Globalization has aided the spread of information at a much faster rate than was previously common. Media entities have taken advantage of this system to deliver information quickly and effectively. Breaking news items from some of the remotest places in the world are now able to reach media consumers thanks largely to information and communication technologies enlisted by large media corporations. Internationally, CNN has pioneered the art of instant news delivery around-the-clock, while in the Middle East, Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya followed suit.

It has become commonplace to receive information and updates from journalists who use the Internet or satellite uplinks to deliver their stories. When Jurgen Habermas envisaged the concept of the public sphere, he had in mind a community or a nation as a place where ideas and information could be exchanged. In today's connected world, the public sphere goes beyond a single community. In effect, the public sphere has become the entire world. As Herman and McChesney (1997) commented, the media are "the preeminent vehicles of communication" in the public sphere and as citizens we "give heavy weight to the media's ability to contribute to the public sphere."

There is no doubt that media plays an important role in the drive toward an increasingly globalized world. Media helps in the spread of information and in the spread of knowledge. But media does much more than that. It aids the spread of ideas, the spread of ideals and the spread of culture. One of the main reasons that American popular culture is now so widespread across the world is due to its glamorization in the media. The way that teenagers dress in many countries in the Middle East and indeed in some parts of Africa is reminiscent of the way that American teenagers dress. Hip hop culture has found a tremendous following across the world. And the American way of life and America in general have been glorified in American media.

Methodology

This research studied film and television in Kuwait and determined the percentage of foreign content in each medium. In doing so, the study aimed to measure the prevalence of international media. The choice of film and television was due to a number of reasons. In the case of film, the decision was made to study this medium due to its popularity as a form of entertainment. In a conservative society where social interaction is somewhat limited, movie theaters represent an outlet and an accepted form of entertainment and social engagement. In addition, movie theaters

are widespread in Kuwait and are easily accessible to a large segment of the population. They are modern, air-conditioned, comfortable, provide quality entertainment and are comparable to those found in the United States. Television was also examined due to its popularity as a form of both entertainment and education in Kuwait.

Starting on August 20, 2012, and for a period of eight weeks, weekly observations were conducted on the content of both movie theaters and television stations. For film, a total of five movie theaters were selected. All five theaters belonged to the Kuwait National Cinema Company, Cinescape. Cinescape is a private company with a monopoly on the distribution and screening of films in Kuwait. Its theaters are all located in well-known shopping malls throughout Kuwait City. The malls chosen for this research were: The Avenues Mall, 360 Mall, Al Fanar Mall, Marina Mall and Al Sharqia Mall. Typically, Cinescape releases a weekly schedule for its theaters every Monday. This schedule can be accessed at any of its theaters or on its website.

August 20, 2012 was selected as the starting date for this study since it was the first day of Eid ul-Fitr, a four-day period of festivity to celebrate the end of Ramadan. During this occasion, it is common practice for families to visit with each other and generally engage in outdoor activities. It is also common practice for people to go to movie theaters as a form of celebration. The researcher deemed that eight weeks represented a sufficient period of time to collect and assess data. Cinescape screens movies for a maximum of six weeks, after which they are replaced with new ones. Eight weeks therefore represented ample time to study a “cycle” from the start of the screening of the movie to its end.

Four television stations were selected for this study: Al Watan TV, Al Rai TV, Kuwait TV and Kuwait TV2. Al Watan and Al Rai are privately owned independent entities and have been in operation for only a few years. Their programming is in Arabic. By contrast, KTV and KTV2 are government-owned media systems. KTV’s transmission is in Arabic while that of KTV2 is in English. These four television stations were selected because they are the most visible and well-known stations in Kuwait through advertising in local newspapers and on billboards. Two times a week observations were carried out on these selected television stations to determine their programming content. These observations were conducted during the week (on Tuesday) and during the weekend (on Friday). These two days were selected in order to assess the variety of programming during a typical work day and during the weekend (Kuwait’s workweek starts on Sunday and ends on Thursday).

Foreign Content in Kuwait’s Media

Kuwait has a diverse society with Kuwaitis representing only one-third of the country’s population of about 3.5 million. Arabic is Kuwait’s main language and the government uses Arabic to conduct its business. Most foreigners are Arabic-speakers from other countries in the

Middle East such as Egypt and Lebanon. There is, however, a considerable non-Arabic speaking minority, such as the large communities from India and the Philippines as well as a sizeable community from western countries. As such, English is Kuwait's second language, making Kuwait a cosmopolitan and bilingual society. As Wheeler (2000) pointed out "one of the reasons Kuwaiti media space is so penetrated by foreign discourse is that Kuwait feels it necessary to provide for all the needs of its residents."

The country's oldest and main broadcaster, Kuwait Television, has a number of channels and transmits almost exclusively in Arabic. The exception is KTV2, which has programming mostly in English. Kuwait's most widely circulated newspapers are printed in Arabic, although there are a number of English-language newspapers such as Kuwait Times and Al Watan Daily.

Like many other countries in the region, Kuwaiti society has been inundated with media products from other countries. It is estimated that there are about 600,000 Indians who live and work in the country. A further 500,000 foreign workers come from Egypt. As such, media outlets in the country have had to cater to the tastes of these two large non-Kuwaiti communities. This is especially visible in movie theaters, where Egyptian and Indian movies are ever present.

Film

Cinescape has a monopoly on movie theaters in Kuwait. While the company has no stand-alone theaters, its theaters can be found in most shopping malls in the country. To a large extent, Kuwait is a consumer society and large shopping malls represent a standard part of society. Cinescape theaters take advantage of the large volume of shoppers visiting malls, especially during weekends. Movie-going is considered to be a typical pastime in Kuwaiti society and large crowds usually frequent cinemas each weekend. Newly released movies are eagerly anticipated, specifically those that are produced in Hollywood. Entrance tickets at Cinescape theaters cost between KD 2-KD 3.5 (\$7-\$12.25) depending on time of day and how recently the movie was released. Typically, a movie screened at 11 a.m. on a Tuesday will cost KD 2 while one screened at 8 p.m. on a Friday will cost KD 3.5.

During the eight-week period in which this research was conducted, the majority of movies in the five movie theaters were made in the United States. The popularity of U.S. films in Kuwait might be due to the glamorization of American culture in its media as well as the films' all-action and blockbuster styles. No other country is able to produce films such as those that are made in Hollywood. As Baran (2012) pointed out, the twenty highest-grossing movies in history were all made in the U.S. Success at the box office is due to a combination of factors such as the availability of financial and technological know-how and the ability to entertain the audience. The capacity to conduct market research and to use its results to tap into the minds and fantasies of potential movie-goers is perhaps the single most determining factor about Hollywood's ability to produce quality content.

The Avenues Mall Movie Theater

The total number of movies screened at the Avenues Mall movie theater varied from 7 movies in weeks 1 and 2 to 11 movies in week 4. From weeks 1 through 6, no Kuwaiti movie was shown at this particular theater. However, in weeks 7 and 8, 1 Kuwaiti movie was shown in each week, representing 13 and 10 percent of total movies shown respectively. On average, there was 1 Egyptian and 1 Indian movie shown per week, except weeks 7 and 8 when no Egyptian movies were screened and week 3 when 2 Indian movies were screened. Also, 1 British movie was shown every week, with the exception of weeks 4, 5 and 6. The overwhelming majority of movies shown at this particular theater were made in Hollywood. In weeks 1 and 2 for instance, 57 percent of movies shown were made in Hollywood, which represented the lowest percentage of American movies during the eight-week period. In week 4, 9 out of 11 movies shown were made in Hollywood, representing 81 percent of the total movies shown (see Table 1).

Table 1: Movies screened at the Avenues Mall movie theater

	Kuwaiti	American	British	Egyptian	Indian	Other	Total
Week 1	0	4	1	1	1	0	7
Week 2	0	4	1	1	1	0	7
Week 3	0	6	1	1	2	0	9
Week 4	0	9	0	1	1	0	11
Week 5	0	8	0	1	1	0	10
Week 6	0	6	0	1	1	0	8
Week 7	1	4	1	0	1	1 (Turkey)	8
Week 8	1	6	1	0	1	1 (Turkey)	10

360 Mall Movie Theater

During the eight-week period in which research was conducted, the number of movies screened at this theater varied per week from a high of 14 movies in week 5, to a low of 8 movies in weeks 1, 2 and 7. The only Kuwaiti movie shown at this location was in week 7, and it represented 13 percent of the total number of movies screened. In most weeks, there was at least either 1 Egyptian or 1 Indian movie shown, with the exception of week 7. In weeks 1, 2, 3 and 8, at least 1 British movie was shown, while in weeks 4, 5, 6 and 8, 2 British movies were screened, representing between 13 and 25 percent of the total movies shown. However, in week 7, 3 British movies were screened, representing 38 percent of all movies shown. This is the highest percent of British movies encountered during the course of this research. Again, the majority of movies screened at this location were American made. This ranged from a low of 3 movies in week 7 (representing 38 percent of total movies shown) to a high of 10 movies screened in week 5 (representing 71 percent of total movies shown). Percentage-wise, week 4 contained the highest number of American movies shown at 75 percent (see Table 2).

One reason for the high percentage of American movies in week 4 is that a number of new movies were released in this week such as “Stolen” (starring Nicholas Cage) and “Seven Below” (starring Val Kilmer and Ving Rhames). Such well-known Hollywood stars usually attract big crowds. Another reason for the high percentage of American movies is that week 4 coincided with the last week of summer vacation for educational institutions in Kuwait. The number of moviegoers most likely drops during the school year, particularly during weekdays.

Table 2: Movies screened at 360 Mall movie theater

	Kuwaiti	American	British	Egyptian	Indian	Other	Total
Week 1	0	5	1	1	1	0	8
Week 2	0	5	1	1	1	0	8
Week 3	0	7	1	1	1	0	10
Week 4	0	9	2	0	1	0	12
Week 5	0	10	2	1	1	0	14
Week 6	0	9	2	1	1	0	13
Week 7	1	3	3	0	0	1 (Turkey)	8
Week 8	0	8	2	1	0	1 (Turkey) 1 (Australia/ Singapore)	13

Marina Mall Movie Theater

The total number of movies screened per week at the Marina Mall movie theater varied from a low of 3 movies in week 8, to a high of 8 movies in weeks 3, 5, 6 and 7. During the eight-week period, not a single Kuwaiti movie was screened at this location. Likewise, not a single Indian film was screened at this movie theater. In most weeks, 1 Egyptian movie was shown, with the exception of weeks 4 and 8. A British-made film was screened in weeks 3, 7 and 8. There was a minimum of 2 U.S.-made films shown in week 8 and a maximum of 7 U.S.-made films shown in weeks 5 and 6. Percentage-wise, Hollywood movies represented a high of 100 percent of movies shown in week 4 and a low of 67 percent of movies shown in week 8 (see Table 3).

Table 3: Movies screened at the Marina Mall movie theater

	Kuwaiti	American	British	Egyptian	Indian	Other	Total
Week 1	0	4	0	1	0	0	5
Week 2	0	4	0	1	0	0	5
Week 3	0	6	1	1	0	0	8
Week 4	0	5	0	0	0	0	5
Week 5	0	7	0	1	0	0	8
Week 6	0	7	0	1	0	0	8
Week 7	0	6	1	1	0	0	8
Week 8	0	2	1	0	0	0	3

Al Fanar Mall Movie Theater

The Fanar Mall movie theater screened between 4 and 11 movies per week during the eight-week period of the study. During this time, not a single Kuwaiti movie was shown. Comparatively, at least 1 British film was screened at this location, with the exception of weeks 7 and 8. Likewise, 1 Egyptian movie was shown every week, with the exception of weeks 4 and 8. At least 1 Indian movie was screened every week, although 2 Indian movies were shown in week 3, representing 22 percent of total movies shown for that particular week. Movies made in Turkey accounted for 25 percent of total films shown at this location in week 8. This represents a high number percentage-wise, but in terms of numbers, it only accounts for 1 in 4 films. Movies made in Hollywood represented the majority of films shown at this movie theater. That ranged in number from a low of 3 movies per week in week 8 to a high of 8 movies per week in weeks 5 and 6. Percentage-wise, U.S.-made films accounted for between a low of 56 percent of movies screened in week 3, to a high of 75 percent of total movies screened in week 8 (see Table 4).

Table 4: Movies screened at the Al Fanar Mall movie theater

	Kuwaiti	American	British	Egyptian	Indian	Other	Total
Week 1	0	4	1	1	1	0	7
Week 2	0	4	1	1	1	0	7
Week 3	0	5	1	1	2	0	9
Week 4	0	6	1	0	1	0	8
Week 5	0	8	1	1	1	0	11
Week 6	0	8	1	1	1	0	11
Week 7	0	7	0	1	1	1 (Turkey)	10
Week 8	0	3	0	0	1	1 (Turkey)	4

Al Sharqia Mall Movie Theater

Over the course of eight weeks, the Al Sharqia Mall movie theater screened between 3 to 9 movies on any given week. During this time period, this particular movie theater did not screen a single Kuwaiti movie. Similarly, the Al Sharqia mall movie theater did not screen any Indian movies. It did, however, show at least one British movie per week, with the exception of weeks 6, 7 and 8. It also showed one Egyptian movie per week, with the exception of weeks 4 and 8. Not surprisingly, most movies shown at this location were U.S. made. The fewest number of American movies were shown in week 8. In that particular week, only 2 American movies were shown, representing 67 percent of total movies screened. The highest number of American movies shown was 7, in weeks 5, 6 and 7. Percentage-wise, the highest number of U.S.-made films screened was 78 percent in weeks 5 and 7 (see Table 5).

Table 5: Movies screened at the Al Sharqia Mall movie theater

	Kuwaiti	American	British	Egyptian	Indian	Other	Total
Week 1	0	4	1	1	0	0	6
Week 2	0	4	1	1	0	0	6
Week 3	0	3	1	1	0	0	5
Week 4	0	4	1	0	0	0	5
Week 5	0	7	1	1	0	0	9
Week 6	0	7	0	1	0	0	8
Week 7	0	7	0	1	0	1 (Turkey)	9
Week 8	0	2	0	0	0	1 (Turkey)	3

Television

All four television channels studied are local stations. Their headquarters are in Kuwait and their transmission is from Kuwait City. Over the eight-week period of this study, the programming content of all four stations was sampled on 16 occasions, two times per week (on Tuesdays and Fridays). All four channels had identical programming on Tuesday and Friday of each week. Additionally, all four channels are free and no subscription fee is required. However, there is stiff competition in the Kuwaiti market when it comes to television since there are hundreds of other channels available. The overwhelming majority of these channels broadcast in either Arabic or English. Arabic channels are typically from other countries in the Arab world, while English channels are from the U.S. and the U.K. Some of the Arabic channels available in Kuwait are Al Jazeera based in Qatar, Al Arabiya (Saudi-owned but based in Dubai in the UAE) and MBC (also based in Dubai). Channels from the U.S. and the U.K. available in Kuwait include CNN, FOX News, The Food Network, BBC and SKY News. Other channels from European countries such as France, Italy and Germany are also available and broadcast in Arabic, English or in their native languages. Examples of these are DW from Germany (which transmits in Arabic, English and German) and France 24 (which transmits in Arabic, English and French).

Al Rai Television

Launched in 2004, Al Rai TV (“the opinion” or “the view”) is part of a private media group that also publishes a newspaper of the same name. According to its website, Al Rai TV’s satellite channel is available to a global audience. However, since the station broadcasts in Arabic, its main target audience is the Arabic-speaking region of the Middle East and North Africa.

Al Rai typically broadcasts 24 hours a day, although its shows are re-run throughout the day. For instance, *Bu Darwish*, a local soap opera is aired at 6:30 a.m., 11:45 a.m. and at 7:05 p.m. Al Rai’s entire lineup consists of Kuwaiti shows, including soaps, educational programming,

religious programming and news. This was characteristic of Al Rai's schedule on both Tuesdays and Fridays.

Al Watan Television

Al Watan TV ("the nation") is part of a media group that publishes newspapers in both Arabic and English and that carry the same name. The English daily includes a supplement published by the International Herald Tribune, the international version of The New York Times. Al Watan TV was established in 2006 and broadcasts in Arabic. It therefore mainly targets the Arabic-speaking population in the region.

Al Watan TV typically broadcasts a total of eleven shows throughout the day in a 24-hour format. Programs are usually broadcast at a certain time and repeated later during the day. For instance, *Musafir ma Al-Qu'ran* (Travelling with the Qu'ran), a religious show with an educational theme is first broadcast at 5:50 p.m. and re-run at 4 a.m. and again at 9:30 a.m. *Bu Gatadah wa Bu Nabil* (Gatadah's father and Nabil's father) an entertainment show that has gained popularity over the years is shown at four different times throughout the day at 12:30 a.m., 9 a.m., 1 p.m. and 7:10 p.m. Ten out of the eleven shows (91 percent) broadcast on Al Watan TV were Kuwaiti made, while the eleventh show was from Egypt. This lineup was typical of Al Watan TV on both Tuesdays and Fridays.

Kuwait TV

Kuwait TV is a state-run media entity that operates under the Ministry of Information. It began broadcasting in 1961 and today features a number of television channels such as KTV, KTV2, KTV Sport and KTV Plus. KTV is on air 24 hours per day and broadcasts in Arabic. Its lineup consists of a combination of educational, entertainment, social and religious shows. Most programs are broadcast at a certain time and re-run during a 24-hour period. For instance, *Naam wa La* (Yes and No), a social program that treats a variety of issues in society such as health and education is first broadcast at 9:50 a.m. and repeated at 10:10 p.m.

Of the 31 shows broadcast on a given Tuesday, 26 were made in Kuwait, representing 84 percent of the total number of shows. The remaining shows were produced in Egypt, Jordan or Syria and had either an entertainment or an educational theme. On Fridays, a total of 28 shows were broadcast, of which 23 were Kuwaiti, representing 92 percent of the total number of shows. Again, the rest of the shows were Egyptian, Jordanian or Syrian.

Kuwait TV2

KTV2 was the fourth television station studied for this project. This channel's programming is exclusively in English, presumably targeted toward Kuwait's expatriate community. KTV2 broadcasts 24 hours a day, but unlike the three other television channels each show airs only once a day, with no subsequent re-runs. This is probably due to the fact that its lineup consists entirely of foreign content of which there is no shortage.

KTV2's lineup on Tuesdays and Fridays consists of a total of 21 shows each day. Of these, only 3 shows are Kuwaiti made. These are: *Local Arabic Text*, an educational/entertainment program (4:30-5 p.m.), the news in English (8-8:30 p.m.) and *Spotlight on Sports* (10-10:30 p.m.). This accounts for only 14 percent of programming that is locally made. Most of the remaining 86 percent of content on KTV2 is imported from the U.S. (67 percent). The rest of the shows are from the U.K., Canada and France (total 19 percent). It must be noted that most programs that are imported from abroad are old, such as *Walker, Texas Ranger*, an American television show that was produced between 1993 and 2001.

Concluding Remarks

This research examined the programming content of selected movie theaters and television stations in Kuwait for a period of eight weeks. This was done in order to determine the percentage of foreign content in some of Kuwait's media outlets. International media's long reach is clearly visible in some Kuwaiti media outlets. When it comes to movie theaters, Kuwait's cinemas are almost entirely dominated by Hollywood movies. In some instances, 80 percent of movies in a given week are U.S. made. Movies made in other countries such as the U.K., India and Egypt are also shown in Kuwait's movie theaters, although these never exceed 38 percent of the total number of movies shown. During the time that this research was conducted, only one locally made movie was shown in movie theaters. The majority of Arabic movies screened in Kuwait's movie theaters were made in Egypt, a country with a more developed movie industry. Media content made in the U.S. is very popular in Kuwait and the spread of American pop culture has added to this popularity and has made Hollywood products accepted and anticipated in Kuwait.

Television stations provided entirely different statistics. Arabic-language television stations are more likely to run programs in Arabic than movie theaters. Of the four channels studied, three broadcast their programming in Arabic. As such, their content tended to be either made locally, or imported from other Arabic-speaking countries such as Syria or Egypt. In some instances, 100 percent of content was made in Kuwait, as was the case of Al Rai TV. For the only English-language station studied as part of this research (KTV2), local programs in some instances constituted about 16 percent of total programs aired. The remaining 86 percent of programs were imported from Canada, France, the U.K., but primarily from the U.S. Thus, while Kuwait produced considerable local content in Arabic for television, it produced significantly less content in English.

Three of the four Kuwaiti television channels studied are able to produce programs that are made locally at least 90 percent of the time. This could be attributed to the fact that television shows are cheaper to produce than movies, especially interview-style shows that consist of a conversation with an expert. Al Rai TV's *Ahadith wa 'Ebar* (Conversations and Lessons), an educational show with a religious theme, usually features the host interviewing a guest. Likewise, KTV's *Al 'Alam Hadha Al Sabah* (The World This Morning), a news program that features mostly social information, usually invites experts to explore a range of topics such as safe driving, family health and environmental awareness.

Pintak (2009) stressed that "media plays a fundamental role in the formation of national identity." Wheeler (2000) added that "despite the availability of numerous sources of information, including widespread access to international media, Kuwaiti national identity remains strong." This connection to a strong national identity is seen in Arabic-language programming that makes up most of the content of Kuwait's television channels. To an extent, television is a media form that one literally invites into his/her home, unlike a movie theater that one physically goes to. As such, it seems that Kuwaitis seek to preserve a sense of identity by making sure that Kuwaiti channels, whether publicly or privately-owned, with access to Kuwaiti homes, feature content that is mostly in Arabic. These television channels want to preserve national identity, while movie theaters that cater to foreigners as well as Kuwaitis, are driven by profits more than television and are therefore influenced by globalization and its long reach. Movie theaters feature much more international content than television, a sign that in Kuwait globalization affects film but does not affect television.

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