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Who Censors What and How? A Linguistic Inquiry into Censorship in Arab Audiovisual Media

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ABSTRACT

Censorship is undoubtedly a complex topic to study and research. Its multifaceted and layered nature has evolved in response to shifting socio-cultural, political, and technological dimensions of human life. Current research and real-world events demonstrate that censorship persists, although it often takes less direct and more subtle forms. Despite the significant role that censorship plays in shaping the production, distribution, and circulation of various forms of expression—including those in the Arab world—it remains under-researched in this region. This paper reviews censorship and censorial practices imposed on different domains of art, literature, and entertainment, namely books and publishing, televised shows, and theatrical drama. Drawing on examples from various contexts and historical periods, particularly in the Arab world, the paper highlights both continuity in censorship responses and the evolving mechanisms of how censorship is implemented—and how people react to it—over time. The analysis demonstrates how writers, publishers, playwrights, directors, translators, and television producers navigate and adapt to evolving censorship norms, thereby ensuring their content reaches the intended audiences. Notably, the paper highlights the dynamic interplay between political, religious, economic, and cultural forces that drive censorial practices. By illuminating these interactions, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how censorship operates as a complex, adaptive mechanism across different media and socio-political environments.

Keywords: Books; Censorship; Censors; Television; Theatre

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1. Introduction

Censorship is undoubtedly a complex topic to study and research, given that its multifaceted and layered system of operation has evolved in response to the shifting coordinates of socio-cultural, political, and technological aspects of human life [1]. While life has become relatively more straightforward—and certainly more cosmopolitan—through advancements in communication, transportation, and the publication of printed materials, the persistence of censorship remains unaffected [2]. Technological development and access to a wealth of information through high-tech devices have not diminished the relevance or difficulty of studying censorship.

Both current research and everyday experiences of individuals and institutions demonstrate that censorship persists, though now more often in indirect, implicit forms rather than overt, explicit ones. Censorship in Arab audio-visual media often reflects deeply rooted cultural norms and values, where notions of morality, religion, and national identity shape what is deemed acceptable for public consumption [3–7].

Censorship has always been practised, with techniques and methods that have become increasingly sophisticated and diverse [8]. It is implemented not only in authoritarian states but also in democratic societies. Even as the international community continues to advance—beginning with the Industrial Revolution and extending into political reformations, democratisation, social justice, and economic development—many aspects of censorship have remained unchanged. While the motivations behind censorship—often rooted in power and control—have not undergone drastic shifts, the forms and mechanisms of enforcement have evolved due to legal developments, technological advancements, and heightened awareness of human rights, particularly the right to freedom of expression.

This paper aims to examine the primary contexts in which censorship operates, including books, theatre, and television. It begins with a brief definition of censorship, followed by a review of the relevant literature. The study then explores who imposes censorship, what is censored, and how censorship functions. Through an analysis of multiple examples—where censorship was enacted by institutions, individuals, governments, or the public—the paper illustrates the evolving nature of censorship across the three main domains.

2. What is Censorship, Who Enforces It, and How?

Almost all definitions of censorship, regardless of the context, however, focus on the aspect of restricting access to information deemed inappropriate by either the target audience or the regime in the target country [9,10]. For example, censorship is defined by Caso and Collins [11] as the practice of prohibiting any spoken or written expression that is deemed threatening to the political order or the dominant religious institution by political and/or religious powers. They add that censorship involves the purposeful manipulation of information to which people might be exposed, as well as the suppression of information by prohibiting publications on specific issues. Another definition of censorship that illustrates the range of sources of censorship in its modern-day forms is provided by Day [12]. For her, censorship is an activity that occurs when not only governments but also individuals decide that a word, an image, or an idea expressed in a book, an article, a song, a film, a photograph, or even a sculpture is objectionable and runs counter to the publicly-stated morals of these governments or individuals so that it (the word, the image, the idea) must, inevitably, be censored.

Subtitling in the Arab world is frequently subject to censorial intervention, with translators modifying or omitting content to align with sociopolitical sensitivities and avoid potential backlash from authorities or audiences [13–17]. While censorship in the Arab world is often perceived as a rigid, top-down mechanism enforced solely by governmental authorities, recent research demonstrates a far more complex and layered system [18]. Al-Qudah [19] presents a compelling empirical examination of the foreign film distribution system in the Arab Middle East, demonstrating how censorship is enacted not only by official censors but also by exhibitors, translators, and importers. For example, in the case of The Wolf of Wall Street and The Danish Girl, censorship was initiated by exhibitors through pre-release filtering of scenes considered overtly controversial, such as those involving nudity or religious content. However, despite these anticipatory edits, the films were still banned or pulled from cinemas by official classification depart-

ments, revealing discrepancies between commercial and institutional censorship standards. These real-world cases highlight the importance of considering the full spectrum of agents and processes that shape audiovisual content in the region.

This system, as Al-Qudah [19] terms it, "enabling censorship," reflects a shift from a prohibitive model of censorship to one that operates through collaborative negotiation and commercial pragmatism. Interviews with film classifiers, translators, and exhibitors reveal that censorship is increasingly used to adapt foreign films to local sensibilities, making them screenable rather than excluding them outright. Translators, for instance, frequently engage in euphemization and cultural adjustment, sometimes guided by formal guidelines and at other times relying on their judgement, shaped by implicit norms and market expectations. These findings not only substantiate the argument that censorship in the Arab world is both explicit and implicit but also underscore the need for a broader understanding of censorship as a shared, negotiated, and dynamic process.

This discussion endeavours to demonstrate how the agents engaged in the production and dissemination of different forms of art, literature, and entertainment, namely books and book publishing, TV shows, and theatrical drama, deal with the inevitable censorship in order to enable the production, dissemination, and success of these forms of expression. However, since the state does not always impose censorship, whether it is a dictatorship or another form of regime, as censorship can sometimes be imposed by religious authorities or by the target audience, responses to censorship may vary. However, this review demonstrates that when the source of censorship is one, responses are pretty similar across time and space. To illustrate these responses to censorship and how these responses have become part and parcel of the systems of production and dissemination of books, TV shows, and drama, I discuss several examples of real events when these three forms of literature and entertainment have been subject to censorship either as they have been produced or even after production (and sometimes circulation) from both sets of cultural and linguistic settings – Arabic and Western (Anglophone and European). This discussion aims to illustrate how several agents, beyond official censors, are involved in enforcing censorship through self-censorship and how various factors, including economic and political changes, may also influence the production and dissemination of these forms of literature and entertainment. To begin the discussion, I first cast light on examples from the context of books and book publishing.

2.1. Censorship in the Context of Books

In the context of book publishing, censorship has always been in effect, even though the laws governing the writing and publishing of books have undergone various changes, from being realtively strict to becoming lenient or even the opposite. Legal censorship, for example, was strictly imposed centuries ago. During the reign of Henry VIII, a new licensing system was mandated, requiring manuscripts to be examined by the church [20,21]. This publication law prohibited publishing books that conflicted with the religious institution affiliated with the English monarchy. These early forms of legal censorship parallel modern censorial laws regulating publications worldwide.

In Jordan, book publishing was previously governed by the Law of Press and Publications, which has since been replaced by a system of control through the National Library in Amman [22]. Egypt followed a similar trajectory, where print publishing laws were also recently abolished. However, the removal of official censorship laws does not imply the cessation of censorship altogether. Self-censorship persists among writers and publishers, influenced by evolving technologies, economic instability, and political unrest.

For instance, publishers in the Arab world face economic constraints that compel them to self-censor. An Egyptian publisher noted that post-devaluation printing and distribution costs affected publishing decisions [23]. The surveillance of bookshops by security forces and the prioritisation of financial over literary merit force publishers to ensure that what they publish is deemed acceptable. As a result, publishers carefully choose topics to avoid losses and to sustain the industry. The declining readership in the Arab world further intensifies these concerns [24].

The war in Syria, which began in 2011, significantly reduced book publications [25]. One publisher stated a drop from forty titles annually to just four between 2011 and 2015 [26]. Political turmoil forces publishers to pursue safer topics and seek markets in Gulf countries, regions where

stricter censorship governs content related to sex, religion, or politics. Therefore, even in seemingly relaxed environments, censorship is indirectly enforced through market pressures.

Ben-Ari [27] articulates that self-censorship arises from implicit alignment with the censor's perspective or from pragmatic considerations. Her case study on the Israeli author of "Israel and the Bomb" (1998) illustrates how views can shift under such pressure. She argues that even without official interference, economic and reputational concerns lead to censorship. This resonates with Arab publishers who exercise self-censorship to secure their positions and profits. In essence, editorial practices become tools for preemptively managing censorship.

Translated books face comparable scrutiny. Billiani [28] illustrates how Mondadori, under Mussolini's regime, aligned its foreign publication choices with Fascist ideology. Mondadori selected texts that reinforced national culture and sought approval from the regime to publish. This mirrors the actions of Arab publishers today who align content with regional ideologies to maintain a market presence.

Even in democratic societies, religious sensitivities prompt censorship. When Al-Azhar banned Naguib Mahfouz's "Awlad Haritna" in Egypt, a Lebanese publisher issued a sanitised version to ensure its regional acceptance. This case demonstrates that self-censorship can be a strategic approach to promoting literature while respecting socio-religious boundaries.

This thematic and comparative discussion reveals that censorship—whether legal, institutional, self-imposed, or driven by public expectations—operates through complex mechanisms. The dynamics of censorship in books involve a collaborative effort among stakeholders, balancing content integrity and market demands. Ultimately, these patterns persist across time and geography, highlighting the evolution, rather than the elimination, of censorship in publishing.

Book censorship in general has steadily declined since Socrates' execution in ancient Athens, to the point now, at least in the West, of a near-complete absence of censorship imposed on books targeting adult readers. Between these two opposites, however, books have been censored and continue to be censored in various forms: burning, banning, or the deletion of parts deemed offensive. The extent to which book censorship is practised—lenient or strict—and the practice to be applied—outright ban or partial excision—relies on each specific situation. In a conservative country like Egypt, book censorship has become more lenient over the years, especially now that official censorship of literature and art has been abolished in Egypt. This has been evident in the "changing tastes of a new generation of Egyptians who would rather read and write about the social ills and hardships of average people rather than the nation's past political wounds" [29]. Such a change in readers' and writers' tastes resulted in books that tackle taboo issues in Egyptian society, such as "homosexuality, sexual harassment, political corruption, religious extremism, prison torture and cultural biases" [29]. Addressing these taboo topics in literary and non-literary works, such as Alaa Al-Aswany's Yacoubian Building (2002), by Egyptian writers has provoked controversy in Egyptian society and among Egyptian censors. In this regard, Wassmann argues that although censorship was officially abolished, "[i]n practice, objectionable passages are often trimmed, or publications banned from importation by government or religious bodies" [29]. For this reason, writers need to know where to draw the line they should not cross; this is advice Alaa Al-Aswany followed when he wrote his controversial novel Chicago (2007), in which he exposed some of Egypt's political, moral, and religious taboos. In this respect, Chicago's publisher states that the novel's manuscript was approved uncut as the writer and the publishing house knew exactly "where not to tread" as they were aware of the "red lines" that are pornography, blasphemy, and the exposure of state secrets [29]. With such broad guidelines on taboo topics, writers are in a position to balance between what they want to write and what guarantees their books will be published, especially, as mentioned previously, when there are sacrifices to be made to ensure profits and to save the book industry in the Arab world.

This collaborative work between the writer and the publisher, towards achieving an approved publication, signifies how these agents can play a part in enforcing censorship by implementing what is perceived as editorial practices. Furthermore, these agents and publishers consider these editorial practices as their approach to dealing

with and responding to censorship. Be that as it may, the comparatively lenient censorship in the context of book publishing is more rigorous in the context of theatre. Theatre censorship tends to be more severe due to the nature of the medium, which is often interactive and inherently political, as it provides a closer representation of the topic addressed through the personification of the events by actors and actresses. In the following, I will discuss the context of theatre censorship and provide several examples of censorship in theatre.

2.2. Censorship in the Context of Theatre

Theatre is, of course, a form of entertainment and expression that has its roots deep in human beings' need for story and myth [30]. The power of the medium resides in its ability to not only transmit ideas but also to shape perception, acceptance, refusal, and even resistance to the social and political phenomena and events that take place in any given society, which is why the power of performance has so often incurred strict censorship [31]. This is because staged drama involves the live representation of stories that inevitably engage audiences in the present moment. In the eyes of conservative authorities, the depiction of the drama becomes problematic when controversial topics are addressed and taboos are broken on stage. Although drama censorship in the twenty-first century might seem to be an archaism, according to Sova, especially in many countries that enjoy more freedom of arts and speech, such as the United States and the United Kingdom, the absence of official censorship of drama does not mean that censorship exercised by other agents – influential individuals and groups – is non-existent [31]. The mechanism by which theatrical drama is censored, the reasons for censorship, and even the agents involved in enforcing censorship demonstrate that theatre censorship persists. However, it is practised differently from one country to another.

2.2.1. Legal and Institutional Mechanisms of Censorship

Theatre can be subjected to pre- and post-performance censorship. Pre-publication censorship in the context of drama refers to the process by which a script is presented by either the playwright or the production company for examination by censors before it is approved, approved with modifications, or banned. For example, in the United Kingdom, while many plays were banned before theatre censorship was repealed in 1968, censorship is still imposed, although not by official censors. This means that pre-publication censorship is not officially practised in the UK now, but "something provoked by a private citizen or group who took theatre to the law. Alternatively, an act by the playwright himself or herself induced by a fear of offending…" [32].

2.2.2. Self-Censorship and Public Pressure

Furthermore, playwrights and sometimes other agents involved in theatrical performances practise self-censorship, such as cutting to certain plays or even stopping the staging of others; all of which are not unlikely to occur, especially if the political and social atmosphere at the time of staging the plays is somewhat unsettled. One instance of self-censorship of a play occurred in 2006, when playwright Richard Bean cut parts of his play depicting Jesus Christ (PBUH) that specifically referred to Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) during the play's rehearsal [33]. Bean anticipated that his play, Up on Roof, which contained references to Prophet Mohammad, would insult the Muslim population in the UK, mainly because rehearsals—and thus the staging afterwards—took place during the Muslim protests against the Danish cartoons that depicted the Prophet. Of course, in this situation, the pressure exercised upon playwrights for religious, political, or social reasons results in pushing some boundaries back rather than further [34]. It is safely argued here that trying to avoid such a backlash on the part of the playwright is his way of responding to public censorship by practising self-censorship.

2.2.3. Covert Institutional Censorship

In another incident of censorship imposed by agents other than the official state censor, Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti's play Behzti (Dishonour) "was completely censored after having opened, […] by the producer of the work itself, Birmingham Rep" [35] for allegedly offending the Sikh community in the UK "over a reference to a rape in the Gurdwara" [35]. Such an incident of severe censorship not only urged the play producer to intervene and impose cen-

sorship but also had consequences for Bhatt's next play, Behud (Beyond Belief). Behud was deemed controversial by the Sikh community as it was a satirical depiction of "the events surrounding Behtzi" [35]. The artistic director of Goldman's joint executive at the Soho Theatre refused to stage Behud on the grounds of artistic, financial, and legal issues, as well as being deemed offensive, over a period of three years. Similarly, the play was turned down by the Birmingham Rep after Goldman requested a partner to share the financial costs. A second consequence of the censorship of Behud was that the playwright herself self-censored part of it, which described "[t]he implication of corruption between the character of the local Labour councillor and the Sikh businessman" [35]. From these examples, we can infer that censors in the UK are not necessarily state censors who enforce a censorial law pertinent to one form of expression or entertainment but that they are the very people involved in enforcing covert censorship through their roles in "the executive, the board, the local council, funding bodies, donors and other interests, depending on the particular theatre structure" [35].

2.2.4. Comparative Cases from Authoritarian and Democratic Regimes

Playwrights voluntarily mitigating parts of their plays became a common form of censorship in theatre under dictatorial regimes, such as Fascist Italy, Francoist Spain, and the Stalinist Soviet Union. However, even in non-dictatorial states, self-censorship is practised by playwrights. For instance, in Jordan, Al-Hamad [21] explains that theatre in Jordan in the 1960s was censored by "the Ministry of Culture, the playwrights, directors, the actors/actresses, the press and the audience". Al-Kilani, one of the interviewees in Al-Hamad's study, a former Director-General of the Jordanian Department of Press and Publications, emphasises that playwrights, at the time, "had to submit their manuscripts, the translated plays or foreign texts to the Ministry of Culture" [21] for examination before staging. The censors' decision to approve was followed by their attendance at the play to ensure that the requested changes and cuts had been made as agreed upon in advance. However, another interviewee, Yanis, a well-known Jordanian actor, playwright, and director, stresses that in most situations, Jordanian playwrights exercised self-censorship in advance, whether their plays were original or translated [21]. Furthermore, Yanis maintains that, with respect to religious censorship, the boundaries were clear-cut, and playwrights were careful not to push them, as this, alongside censorship imposed by Jordanian society, would incur financial losses since audiences would be unwilling to attend a play that violated any taboo. Hence, Jordanian playwrights have realised that in order to enable the staging of their plays, they must be able to circumvent the censors' attention and public censorship by practising self-censorship.

2.2.5. Changing Trends in the Arab Region

However, after a period of conservatism in theatrical performances in Jordan, Al-Hamad argues that censorship of theatre eased, and more sensitive topics began to be addressed on stage following the democratisation process that started in 1989. In other Arab countries, instances of censorship of theatre plays have also decreased since 2000. For example, the Syrian director Homam Hout stresses that in the plays that he directed and/or acted in before the Syrian revolution in 2011, he used to oversee the process of obtaining approval for the plays to be staged [36]. In his comments on the censors' level of intervention, he said that after having the manuscript examined by the Syrian board of censors, and if they decided to revise parts of the play, there would usually be room for negotiations with them. A telling example – this time from Lebanon - is Lina Khoury's play, Haki Neswan, which is adapted from Eve Ensler's Vagina Monologues (1996) and was staged in Lebanon in 2006. The manuscript was only granted permission to be staged after several modifications to the original script were made over a period of one and a half. The manuscript was presented to the censors at the Lebanese Ministry of Culture several times for negotiations between the censors and the playwright and director Khoury regarding some parts that contained eroticism and sexual content [37].

As we have seen in the discussion above, although censorial practices may have profound effects on the artistic and aesthetic values of the drama text, as well as the literary creativity of playwrights, they may also make it possible for a play to be performed on stage within the limitations imposed by its immediate context. In the following, I turn to another medium of representation, television, to examine how the agents involved in this ubiquitous

medium of entertainment and expression respond to both official and public censorship.

2.3. Censorship in the Context of Television

Perhaps the most challenging aspect of television censorship is that this medium, unlike other forms of entertainment and expression, is accessible to a wider audience around the world [38,39]. Its universal accessibility, as well as immense popularity, has contributed to transforming it not only into a source of entertainment but also a source of news and information. Moreover, while an actively engaged individual has the opportunity to choose the quality and quantity of information they view on the internet, which is another medium through which users access news, information, and entertainment content, the power of television, Fiss [40] insists, lies in the fact that it "informs even the passive observer" [40]. This means that more audiences are affected by what is broadcast on television, especially since, unlike computers and the internet, watching television requires no technical skills [40]. Additionally, television channels offer a wide range of programmes that cater to various interests of audiences across different age cohorts and educational backgrounds [41]. Moreover, developments in technology in the twenty-first century have contributed to an industry that not only includes cable channels or satellite channels in some parts of the world but also to channels that specialise in certain genres that target specific audiences. This progress in AV media has been accompanied by a complex system of censorship, in which official censors and agents involved in the television industry play a part. However, the rapid proliferation of televised programmes and TV channels has made censors' and other agents' jobs more intricate and difficult. This may be a reason why, according to Hall [42], the control over these programmes and channels has ceased to be an exclusive task for the censor and has led to more individuals and institutions being involved in this control. In this sense, television in the twenty-first century has become a means through which audiences have access to different cultures, languages, ideologies, lifestyles, and viewpoints, which may pose a threat to authorities, especially in countries with authoritarian regimes (although television censorship is not restricted to authoritarian or even conservative countries, as it is also practised in liberal and democratic countries).

Censorship in the context of television serves to suppress nonconformist ideas, life choices, attitudes, and viewpoints, while promoting certain ideologies, cultures, and even individuals, as discussed below [43–45]. This indicates that television has been recognised by some individuals and institutions as a powerful means to promote their ideologies. The power of this medium has, for example, been used by autocratic regimes and authorities to promote their own political and religious agendas, as well as their social perceptions of morality. However, as suggested previously, not only do autocratic states impose strict censorship on televised programmes and employ channels to promote their ideologies, but democratic governments also impose censorship on television. The Encyclopaedia of Censorship Green and Karolides [46], notes that television has always been among the most censored mass media worldwide, although Hendershot [47] argues that it has not been sufficiently researched. However, television remains one of the most censored mass media for the aforementioned reasons; what I attempt to investigate in the following discussion are the ways that the agents (individuals and institutions) implement to deal with censorship imposed either by the state or by the public in order to enable the exhibition of various AV programmes on television.

However, it should be noted that television censorship can be enforced by various agents that differ from one country to another, as the power agents have to impose censorship depends on the source of this power and the purpose of the censorship they seek to implement. Thus, the censorial agents in the context of television could be the very people involved in the industry itself, social groups who seek to preserve a traditional sense of morality and to curb apparent obscenity, the official bodies of censors, and the "companies that pay for the ads" [48]. A certain censorial method might be readily applied in one country but not in another country; similarly, the taboos and restrictions included in a certain regulation might apply to one context but not to another. To illustrate how television censorship operates and how responses to censorship primarily aim to enable the exhibition of various AV content, it will be helpful to examine a few contexts from different parts of the world and across various moments in time.

Censorship in television is largely linked to the in-

crease in popularity of this medium. For example, in the U.S. context, O'Malley [49] argues that television censorship emerged in the 1940s and 1950s of the last century as television became a popular medium for entertainment. At the time, and for decades to follow, broadcasting on television was monopolised by governments, as the only channels authorised to broadcast were those owned by the state or at least controlled by the government. Therefore, during those decades, most television censorship was generated by the state, which, in some countries (like Iran), was (and sometimes still is) supported and legitimised by a religious authority closely linked to the state authority. This meant that censorship of television frequently suppressed and concealed any political views that opposed those advanced by the government in power, as it did not allow people to be exposed to these opposing views in the first place. Furthermore, this kind of censorship, if accompanied by religious censorship, aims to censor any content deemed obscene, morally offensive, heretical and blasphemous, and conflicting with the religious authority's doctrine. To illustrate, in countries with dictatorial regimes, like Fascist Italy and Spain during the Francoist era, not only were television channels either owned or controlled by the governments, but all programmes broadcast on these channels also had to conform to the dictatorships' political views and perceptions of morality, which the church mostly inspired. In democratic countries, however, moral issues, such as the portrayal of sexual relationships and nudity, specifically, were the main reason for censorship imposed on television.

For example, television is still censored in the UK, although the level of censorship has changed and relaxed over the years [50]. It is primarily used to protect and preserve public morality; however, political and religious censorship can sometimes be imposed, if in a less direct manner, under other types of control, such as political correctness. Furthermore, some major broadcasting corporations, although not blatantly admitting the enforcement of censorship, employ practices that manifest self-censorship in order to avoid a face-threatening act of expression. For instance, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) claims that its incorporation of a moderate representation of events and the presentation of opposing viewpoints on any controversial political, religious, or social issue aims to serve the concept of balance that it advocates as a broadcasting corporation [46]. In this regard, BBC programming is controlled by the producers, who in turn observe codes such as the "Guidance Note on the Portrayal of Violence (1979), Tastes and Standards in the BBC (1973), Principles and Practices in News and Current Affairs Programmes, and Principles and Practices in Documentary Programmes" [46]. These codes are concerned with both discussing political and social topics and with portraying violence on screen. However, in terms of sexual content on screen, although it has been "excluded from the Obscene Publications Act of 1959" [46] as a step towards more liberalism, Arthurs [51] argues that the religious influence on moral discourses in this specific context has been incessant in the UK. She maintains that the views of the first director-general of the BBC, Lord Reith, regarding the depiction of sexuality on screen, influenced by his strict religious views, continued to be "reinforced by the National Viewers and Listeners Association" [51] throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Nowadays, the depiction of sexuality on screen is regulated by codes such as the Code on Sexual Conduct and the Code on Sex and Nudity, which are observed by the BBC and by independent television producers in the UK [51]. The subscription to such codes and the 'balance' that BBC fosters can be regarded as ways of addressing audiences' restrictions on moral issues and preferences regarding political and religious issues, thereby attracting more viewers and achieving higher commercial success by avoiding bias towards a specific political or religious view.

In the USA, the status of television censorship is perhaps even more complex, as we will see in the following, even though state censorship has been largely dropped in name only. What appears to be the root of this complexity is the influence exerted by two opposing political and religious lobbies that influence public views on religious, political, moral, and societal issues in US society as a whole. While one influential lobby is more libertarian and supports all kinds of freedom based on the First Amendment, the second influential lobby is more religious. It acts as the guardian of public morality and family values and, therefore, supports enforcing more restrictions on depiction and expression of sexuality and nudity on various platforms, especially television. As both conflicting camps are powerful and have supporters and advocates among American citizens, television broadcasting is subjected to

unconventional censorial practices.

Consequently, while state censorship on television is nonexistent, censorship is imposed from within the channels [51]. This practice of applying an in-house system of programming regulations, similar to those adopted in well-established networks like ABC, CBS, and Fox, is more acceptable to the audience than the censorship imposed by the government, which might be perceived as contradicting the Constitution and the First Amendment. However, right-wing religious influence on US society has resulted in the foundation of several national, non-profit organisations and associations that demand and support strict television censorship on content that contradicts or denigrates Christianity and/or threatens public morality. In other words, censorship is rooted in audience perception, very often collectivised by associations such as the American Family Association, Citizens for Decency Through Law, and the National Coalition Against Pornography, to mention but a few; such associations campaign in support of censorship and control over television (Green & Karolides, 2014). Arthurs [51] maintains that "Christian fundamentalism is still a major political influence and acts as counter-discourse to the laissez-faire ethics of liberalism and consumerism". This means that these associations, which call for purifying the content screened on television, have influenced and continue to influence the television industry in the US, basically because it is "an almost entirely market-based, commercial enterprise" [51]. Thus, since much of the US audience is influenced by the puritanism that these associations and organisations call for, these commercial channels and their advertisers "cannot afford to alienate their audience" [51]. For this reason, the self-censorship practised by these commercial channels comes into play to respond to public censorship imposed by either the audience or the right-wing lobby and its allied associations, in order to enable the exhibition of various AV programmes on these channels.

In the Arab world, television censorship may differ because, even after the monopoly on television by Arab governments ended and private channels were authorised to broadcast, state censorship continued [52]. In Jordan, for example, broadcasting through the "public broadcaster, Jordan Radio and Television (JRTV), was a monopoly until liberalisation was first introduced by law in 2002" [53]. In 2015, new amendments to the 2002 Audiovisual Law were passed; these amendments, Mendel maintains, are mostly positive, as they "recognise the importance of private broadcasting" and also abolish "the possibility of imprisonment for breaches of the law" [53]. The Radio and Television Broadcasting Department at the MC, a governmental institution, licenses private television channels and monitors and classifies the programmes they show. Thus, television censorship in Jordan is still exercised by the state, especially given that television remains the primary source of news and entertainment for Jordanians, according to a 2017 field study on Jordan's media landscape.

However, according to Mendel, even state censorship of television has been less severe since the amendments of the AV Law in Jordan in 2015. The leniency in the current AV law and the practice of censorship in Jordan today have been manifested in several incidents of violations that would have incurred severe censorship under the law before it was amended. For example, Al-Nsour, the head of the CD at the MC, discusses how a violation committed by one private Jordanian television channel was dealt with by the MC in a tolerant manner. In this instance, the channel screened a foreign film from which an inappropriate sexual scene was not cut. The penalty imposed on the channel was not to stop the screening of the film, as it had already been screened; instead, a warning letter was issued to the channel by the Jordanian MC. This is noteworthy as it indicates a developing leniency in television censorship and in the penalties applied against channels that, wittingly or unwittingly, breach the rules. However, despite the state's imposition of censorship in Jordan, this example indicates that prior self-censorial practices implemented by agents involved in AV exhibitions on television or even private channel owners are likely to mitigate the stricter censorship and penalties imposed by state censors. In this specific example, a prior self-censorial practice, such as cutting out the inappropriate sexual scene, would have prevented the penalty that the CD imposed and enabled the exhibition of the film without problems.

3. Conclusion

The preceding discussion has alluded to various contexts of censorship and how the various agents in each context respond to the censorship imposed either by the state or the public. In the various contexts and examples

of censorship discussed above, one practice to be noticed among these contexts and examples is that self-censorship imposed by various agents involved in the production, distribution and/or exhibition of books, theatre, and television is a key method to respond to state censorship and to obviate some of the more drastic consequences of centrally-controlled censors. Self-censorship, on the part of the various agents such as writers, producers, and translators, does not simply imply their acceptance of censorship, but more principally the recognition of the fact that in the processes of production and promotion of cultural commodities, they are involved in systems in which censorship plays a vital control role. In practice, while some agents involved in these systems may either reject censorship entirely or practise self-censorship in a way that strains against limitations imposed on them, other agents do not push limits but tolerate them and operate accordingly in ways that ensure they do not violate the rules of engagement.

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Informed Consent Statement

Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement

No datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict interests.

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