



Book review

Global Media and Communication

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Mohamed Zayani (ed.), *Digital Middle East: State and Society in the Information Age*.
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‘Digital Middle East’ addresses information and communication technologies (ICT) that play a key role in transforming the Middle East. The publication of this book is certainly timely as the impact of technological changes are significant and play an important role in turning Middle Eastern societies into ‘information-intensive societies’ or ‘network societies’, as Manuel Castells (1996) characterizes. In the era of ‘post-truth’ or ‘Fake news’ in other words, Mohamed Zayani’s edited book emphasizes how social, cultural and economic dynamics define the digital Middle East. Twelve experts engage with ICT and explain how state–society relations are shaped through digital technologies.

The so-called Arab uprisings that began in 2010 affected the political sphere of the Middle East by highlighting digital activism across the region not only by mobilizing the silent majority, but also encouraging millennials to design a hopeful future. It was the beginning of citizen journalism interrogating dictatorships and authoritarian governments. The *Middle East Media Use Survey* reveals that 94 per cent of Middle East and North Africa (MENA) youth use the Internet as a top media activity, which is 17 per cent above the world population. Around 68 per cent is listening to the radio, whereas newspaper readership follows with 50 per cent.

Ilhem Allagui argues in Chapter 2 that the Internet provides a platform for maintaining relationships with family members and friends; in other words, the Internet is the way to ‘stay in touch’ and for ‘being part of the crowd’. However, interactions with friends is based on the socialization of youth in the Middle East. They connect with friends with the same interests, from the same school, same activities and same geographic locations. These facts lead to the question of how educative digital media is for youth in the Middle East. Yet the *2015 Social Media Report* underlines that Arab youth believe that social media is ‘preserving habits and traditions’. Religious authorities’ use of social media is another focal point to consider within the frame of digital contention of youth in the Middle East.

While youth are a key focal point in this research, women are the driving force behind the change of the ICT landscape. Annabelle Sreberny, Emeritus Professor at SOAS, tackles women’s political activism in Chapter 5, where she argues that redesign of the region has encouraged women’s digital activism by obscuring the gender aspect where the online public sphere is dominated by young men under the age of 30. However, this does not cover the fact that women’s online activities are monitored and blocked by authorities. In particular, women journalists, bloggers and editors in Iran, Egypt and Saudi

Arabia were arrested because of their use of social media. On the other hand, Sreberny mentions state-sponsored mobilization of women where she names Iran's Farah Pahlavi, widow of Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, and former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak's wife, Suzanne Mubarak, for their activities to baffle the public and influence the image of their government. Regarding the recent modernization steps of Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad Bin Salman, under which women in Saudi Arabia are allowed to drive for the first time in history, Sreberny accentuates how contradictory it is to restrict online activities, but pretend to be modern to gain credibility in the international arena.

Mark Allen Peterson focuses on the 'Mediated experience in the Egyptian Revolution' where he analyses the role of digital media during the unrests in Egypt in 2011. The natural relationship of dictatorial controlled mass media and opposition has been effected through 'mediation' which represents the integration of media into everyday life. Media technologies such as 'cassette recorders, photocopies, and fax machines' were used against the authoritarian Mubarak regime in Egypt. However, Peterson underlines that it was not comparable with Web 2.0, which accelerated the whole process in Egypt and across the region. Yet he argues that the upheaval was more related to the 'human security regime' starting in 2005 rather than the regional uprising trend that started in Tunisia in late 2010. When the Mubarak regime cut off access to nearly all Internet services in the country on 27 January, he believed he could control the narrative through traditional mass media. It did not take long for him to realize however that digital media was the main vehicle through which the revolution could take shape. In his chapter, Peterson highlights three Egyptians whose mediated experience during the revolution demonstrates the use of smartphone, computer, newspaper, television and face-to-face interactions in relation with the political change in Egypt. Despite his examination of the role of ICT in shaping social and political change in Egypt, the role of freedom with regard to civil liberties and political rights, the country suffers still since the military coup of current President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. *Freedom House 2018* reports that the country is 'not free', while the governance of el-Sisi is described as 'authoritarian'. In fact, the events in Egypt clearly delineate how the media ecosystem went through several changes since 2011, but, more importantly, how digital media is coming under government control day by day, which is reminiscent of the old days of the Mubarak regime controlling mass media.

In the final chapter, Ingmar Weber underlines how ICT's dominance is not only changing societies, but also the way societies are studied. More importantly, he addresses the rise of a global phenomenon, artificial intelligence, and how it will have an impact on daily lives, insomuch as replacing 'medical doctors with automated diagnosis tools'.

Whereas crucial topics such as the role of Arab youth in the revolutions in the Middle East or the dominance of women in the online public sphere are studied in this research, with regard to the role of ICT in geo-cultural and geopolitical contexts, there is a lack of assessment of the rise of radicalism in relation with digital media in the region. In particular, the cases of Syria and Iraq are highly crucial to examine and analyse the relations between security and technology in order to understand the global media flow.

Reference

Castells M (1996) *The Rise of the Network Society*. Oxford: Blackwell Publisher.