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MEDIA EVOLUTION ON THE EVE OF THE ARAB SPRING

Edited by
Leila Hudson, Adel Iskandar, and Mimi Kirk
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Nine months before the Tunisian vegetable vendor Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire in December 2010, initiating the Arab uprisings, the Center for Contemporary Arab Studies (CCAS) at Georgetown University in Washington, DC held a symposium to discuss the dramatic media changes that were shaping the region. With satellite television already two decades old, Internet technology swiftly proliferating across the region, and youth becoming increasingly engaged both in their locales and globally, the Arab world seemed on the cusp of a transformational moment. The March 2010 conference, titled “Information Evolution in the Arab World,” became the impetus for this volume. It followed a similar event held at the beginning of the new Arab information age in 1995, which set the tone for two decades of Arab media and information research across fields ranging from anthropology to journalism. For much of the period between the two CCAS conferences, many analysts waited for an Arab media revolution that would transform the region politically.

The Arab uprisings, commonly, if erroneously, known as the Arab Spring—as in our title—came at a time when researchers had begun to temper expectations of a dramatic media-driven social and political cultural shift. We think it is fair to say that none of the 2010 symposium’s participants would have predicted the imminent regional earthquake that would topple regimes, create utopian expectations of governance, and spark conflict and civil war. Thus, the collection of papers here represents the observations of scholars of television, popular culture, the Internet, and particularly the blogosphere, on Arab society, culture, and politics, at a moment when change had been accumulating but the paradigm shift on the horizon had not been sighted. Carried out prior to the time when the new social media (particularly Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube) came to be dubiously granted causal powers of social revolution by hasty analysis, the papers of this volume, with their grounded research, seem to the editors to become more relevant the further the Arab Spring and its naiveté recedes. At the very least, they will provide a benchmark for future interdisciplinary work that puts the Arab uprisings and their aftermaths, as well as the new social media, in historical context.
Unlike previous conferences of its kind, to date, the 2010 symposium brought together scholars of regional media across various disciplines with activists, station managers, artists, and musicians in a unique conversation that amalgamated the scholarly with the experiential. While the experiential contributions could not be transferred to textual form and into this volume—such as the work of digital animation house Khanfar, the diasporic rap music of the Narcicyst, the Arabized pop culture found on the t-shirts of Jo Bedu, the Islamist music videos broadcast by the satellite television station 4Shabab, and the dissident Arabic poetry of Tamim al-Barghouti—they became an instrumental part of the discussion on mediation, politics, and identity in the region. The keynote address by then-Director General of Al Jazeera, Wadah Khanfar, seemed to herald a new era in global broadcasting and a case for the network’s growing international footprint, ahead of the launch of Al Jazeera America. In 2011, Khanfar would leave and Al Jazeera’s Arabic networks would become embroiled in tangled regional politics unlike ever before.

Hence, the symposium took place at a critical juncture in the decades-long discussion about Arab media. Those who made the conference and this ensuing volume possible were prepared to take risks, and we owe them much gratitude. Michael C. Hudson, then director of CCAS, was the visionary leader behind the conception and mobilization of the symposium’s topic. The conference became the last major event in a string of many in his illustrious 30-year tenure at Georgetown University. Jon W. Anderson of the Catholic University of America contributed significantly to the design of the program and its thematic thrust. Rania Kiblawi, CCAS Associate Director, was ceaseless in her support throughout the event. Then-CCAS Public Affairs Coordinator Margaret Daher was the indefatigable mastermind of the symposium, who, in a span of a few months, sent thousands of emails and navigated the conference grace-fully. Leila Hudson, Adel Iskandar, and Mimi Kirk, the editors of this volume, rounded out the symposium committee.

In regard to the preparation of the manuscript, we are indebted to a very patient cohort of stellar contributors who accommodated the lengthy editorial process that needed to respond to the topsy-turvy events in the region after 2011 and contextualize them in their chapters. We extend heartfelt thanks for the hard work of copy editor Shaheen Qureshi of Tadween Publishing and research assistants Samuel T. McNeil and Deniz Gedizioglu at the University of Arizona. The support of current CCAS Director Osama Abi-Mershed and his staff, especially former Multimedia and Publications Editor Steven Gertz, was also crucial. The book would not have come out in its current form had it not been for the
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publics, imaginaries, soft power, and epistemologies on the eve of the Arab uprisings

Leila Hudson and Adel Iskandar

The 2011 Arab uprisings focused the world’s attention on the explosive proliferation of Middle Eastern media technologies. Coming on the heels of two decades of media and information technology evolution in the region, the uprisings highlighted once again questions about the relationship of communications systems, culture, politics, and power. The real-time coverage of the Arab uprisings focused almost exclusively on “newer” social media, namely Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. However, in 2010, any social change was more broadly linked to a gradual accumulation of new practices, structures, technologies, and subjectivities associated with “older” new media, such as satellite television, Internet access, and blogging. This volume focuses on the complex ecology of media and communications evolutions on the eve of the 2011 uprisings. The various chapters sketch a view of the realm generally thought of as the “public sphere.” Representing the work of scholars in a variety of disciplines and written prior to and during the summer of 2010—just before the popular mobilizations against the Tunisian and Egyptian regimes shocked the world—they present the effects of 15 years of gradual changes in “old” new media and their technical and social infrastructure.

Since the 1990s, new genres of news, entertainment, and spiritual guidance were incubated and popularized in the competitive transnational satellite television market. By 2006, a phase initiated by reality television and individual blogging marked a new level of interactivity, but it was soon overtaken circa 2011 by video blogging, YouTube posting, and
mass interactive social media like Facebook and Twitter. Indeed, since the publication of Yahya Kamalipour and Hamid Mowlana’s *Mass Media in the Middle East: A Comprehensive Handbook* (1994) and Douglas Boyd’s last edition (1999) of *Broadcasting in the Arab World*, developments in Arab media have been nothing short of dizzying. The rapid layering of new media in the region has rendered documentation and analyses of these changes problematic. Today, the task of monitoring and archiving changes throughout all Arab nations is at best painstaking and at worst futile. Earlier survey volumes and studies such as those in this volume that consider the development of Arab media from an earlier period are now increasingly relevant as unique historical documents that shed light on the forces that have facilitated current-day trends.

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By the time Mohamed Bouazizi’s self-immolation marked the beginning of the Tunisian revolution, a sophisticated youthful vanguard gave voice to and amplified many protests of anti-authoritarianism, creating a momentum that spilled out into the streets, crossed borders, and bridged social divides. The Egyptian revolution was its peak, but its troubled aftermath reveals the limits of media activism. Then, as the second wave of the Arab uprisings became mired in regime violence in Libya, Bahrain, Yemen, and especially Syria, a media counterrevolution in which state resources—in particular, old state media outlets and new surveillance technologies linked to established police state infrastructure—were deployed to check the protests. Mukhabarat surveillance that had allowed regimes to keep isolated bloggers in check from 2005 to 2009 was enhanced with hi-tech surveillance software from US firms with results yet to be fully assessed.

The consequence of these layered phases of technology adoption and their social, cultural, and political corollaries was a reconfiguration of Arab public culture conducive to popular social action, but not generally effective in uprooting authoritarianism in the longer term. As illustrated in the chapters collected here, what we think of as the Arab public had many different elements of form and content: moral imaginaries in which Islam and democracy jostled awkwardly together; massive and often disengaged television audiences; active and digitally competent media-savvy elites; state-linked broadcasters competing to win “hearts and minds”; and regimes’ surveillance of media windows into the ever more transparent lives of their subjects. Taken together these factors produced a dynamic and unpredictable media ecosystem.

The different textures and scales, uneven distributions, and various political economic terrains in which these elements mediated Arabs’ everyday lives can help elucidate the complexities of the Arab uprisings. The interaction of these parts, moving at different speeds, makes for
plenty of unintended consequences and a wide range of outcomes. The collective research assembled here, more than quick and dirty theories about social media networks’ causal power or lack of it, is a first step toward understanding the turbulence of the uprisings, in particular how momentum was so strong at the outset and then spread, waned, and yielded to Muslim Brotherhood and regime counter tactics as the uprisings degenerated into malgovernance and civil war by 2013.

What was the state of Arab media in 2010 before the first Tunisian protests surprised the world? The chapters collected here show an intriguing mélange of changes at the levels of society, culture, power, and theory reflected in the four sections of the volume. At the level of society, did the new media constitute a functioning Habermasian public sphere that would foster liberalism and democracy? Not a public, argues Mohamed Zayani, but a citizen audience that produced the lever of public opinion and included the previously marginalized likes of the village women of Kafr Masoud, with whom Sahar Khamis worked. A more forceful subculture of interlinked blogosphere clusters illuminated by Bruce Etling et al. hosted the Muslim Brotherhood networks on which Courtney Radsch provides ethnographic detail through her investigation of Brotherhood bloggers. This segment of the public helped kick-start the revolution in Egypt and eventually coopted it through historically durable organization and successful electoral politics, but by the summer of 2013 was just coherent enough to be a large, easy target for the citizen audience enraged by the year of Muslim Brotherhood misrule. The chapters in Part 1 sketch out the conceptual parameters and some ethnographic components of a broad televisial public characterized by asymmetry in scale and function between producers and consumers and a blogosphere full of compact counterpublics—small, interactive, literate, critical, and vulnerable.

At the level of culture, the chapters on content and literacy show that younger citizens were much engaged in a world of colloquial interactivity on the computer, and even in television consumption. The chapters of Part 2 cluster around the literacies and interactivities of the digital age and its citizens. Gaming in Vit Sisler’s chapter, texting argots in Yves Gonzalez-Quitjano’s essay, colloquial television melodrama in Leila Hudson’s piece, and even traditional religious authority in Bettina Gräf’s analysis were freed by the new media from the strictures of formal fusha and monologic speech, and allowed people to experiment with new voices and scripts—both alphabetic and theatrical. The habits of game playing, texting, consuming melodrama, and even seeking online religious advice are distinctly colloquial—can we see a new dialogism in the digital texts and practices of the pre-uprising era? The rapid spread of new competencies, voices, and habits among a small segment of the digital vanguard in the Arab world makes it easy in hindsight to speculate how a new world may have seemed just over the horizon and helped bring Arab youth into the streets. This was not a vision per se, but a loosely shared set of