

Media as Method in the Age of Revolution: The Rise of Neoliberal Authoritarianism 

Adel Iskandar

The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Middle-Eastern and North African History

Edited by Amal Ghazal and Jens Hanssen

Online Publication Date: Jul 2020 DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199672530.013.4

Abstract and Keywords

This chapter focuses on the importance of examining media as institutions, industries, practices, and content in explorations of contemporary Middle Eastern and North African history, society, and politics. It argues that understanding media is imperative to the very comprehension of colonial legacies, perennial currents of revolutionary discourse, and the rise of neoliberal authoritarianism. By reviewing the critical role that media and communication play as institutions and practices in the configuration of state-centered power as well as the revolutionary resistance to these, the objective is to contribute to the theoretical understandings of contemporary histories in the region. Furthermore, forthcoming research needs to account for state authoritarianism, corporate monopolization, the mobilization of online deliberation, and the militarization of knowledge production.

Keywords: neoliberal authoritarianism, critical cultural studies, political economy of communication, discourse analysis, colonial legacies, revolutionary discourses

The first ever broadcast of the British Empire Radio's Arabic service on January 3, 1938 featured a story about a young Palestinian living under the British Mandate being shot dead by an imperial officer. During the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, Qatari-funded Al-Jazeera¹ broadcast critical coverage of the military operation and its hefty civilian cost from studios in Doha that are just 25 miles away from the US military's Centcom (Al-Udeid Air Base), the functional headquarters from where all bombardments of the country were orchestrated and executed. In 2010, antigovernment protesters used Silicon Valley-based social media platforms to reach, entice, and mobilize communities to rise up against their governments in Tunisia, Egypt, and Bahrain.² In 2020, Iraqi youth rising up against their government and its proxy militias toy with gender roles—women donning moustaches and men wearing hijabs—online and in the square to satirize and ridicule influential cleric Moqtada Al-Sadr's call to avoid gender mixing in the sit-in. In each of these seemingly absurd and peculiar circumstances, the mediation of power, politics, and identity is incomprehensible without recognizing the importance of unpacking the role that media play in contemporary histories of the Middle East and North Africa. This chap-

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ter sets out to articulate the ways in which the study of media in contemporary regional history is critical to our understanding of the sociopolitical, economic, and cultural transformations that have unfolded over the past century. The chapter argues that when we use media analyses as a methodological tool, not unlike other multidisciplinary approaches, we are able to glean far more about how history itself is articulated, represented, and contested. Through both a political economic critique of the media and using critical cultural studies, we can produce substantial understandings of the colonial legacies, perennial revolutions, and neoliberal authoritarianism.

Historicizing Mediation

The circumstances and conditions that inform media institutions and practices in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) today are deeply informed by the social and economic transformations as well as the political convulsions that transpired in the last century of the region's history. For this reason, to characterize the dynamics at play in the contemporary moment, a thematic historicization is necessary. This section argues that the historical circumstances that precipitated our existing models of mediation in the region reflect three prevailing themes—the persistent structure of colonial legacies, the reimagining of revolutionary discourse, and the entanglement of capital with authoritarianism.

Colonial Legacies

The colonial state in the Middle East and North Africa was governed both militarily and ideologically using integrated communication networks. In addition to infiltration of the local print journalism in the post-Ottoman period, the earliest broadcast networks, in the form of terrestrial radio in the region, were launched by colonial powers to stake their claims to territories in the region and to propagandize to the local populations in their languages. The first Arabic language radio broadcast to the region was courtesy of the Italian government's Radio Bari. With the ambition of reaching listeners in the Arabic-speaking countries to advocate for Fascist Italy's commitment to their well-being, the content was geared to undermine the British and French presence in the region prior to the eruption of the Second World War.³ Shortly thereafter, the newly minted British Broadcasting Corporation's (BBC) initial World Service, then explicitly named "Empire Radio" as well as French Radio-East began their first Arabic language programming to cement the UK and France's control over the territories they both held in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region following Sykes-Picot.⁴ They both had the explicit objective of consolidating the power of both countries in the region and to counter the anti-British and anti-French content generated by Radio Bari and other competing political forces vying for influence on local populations, and control over their territories.⁵

The Second World War heralded the magnification and outright transformation of media competition into communication wars. With so much at stake and the MENA region becoming a war zone between the Allies and the Axis, local communities and media entities became embroiled in the rivalries with various colonial powers and their adversaries as

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they invested in both infrastructure and programming on the airwaves and in print journalism. Local populations were being promised improved conditions and comparative freedoms for committing their support to one power or another.

Long after the end of colonial presence in the region, imperial influence continues to exist in multiple forms. One of these is the perpetual impact of Western state propaganda instruments, now rebranded as public diplomacy. The United States' Voice of America (VOA), a long-time extension of the government's outreach to global publics, was reconfigured post-September 11 and relaunched in the form a predominantly youth-oriented top pop music hit station with different streams for each region of the Middle East and North Africa. The so-called "battle for the hearts and minds" of audiences in the region continued unabated with the launch of the single most costly and most ambitious US government media outreach project in the form of Arabic satellite television station Al-Hurra in 2004.⁶ It was an attempt to improve public opinion about the US in the eyes of Middle East and North African publics and to advocate for the country's continued influence in the region. With the same ends, the US government continued to invest in cultural capital—from basketball tournaments and musical concerts to women's rights campaigns and comedy tours—to advocate for itself across the region. This outsourcing and privatization of public diplomacy has become the contemporary norm in imperial influence through the appropriation of cultural production as a tool for outreach and persuasion. Furthermore, by hybridizing and amalgamating cultural content from both the region and the US, these efforts attempt to blur the lines between the two, culminating in public acceptance of American society, culture, politics, and in the Middle East and North Africa.⁷

In a similar vein, France continues to wield considerable influence in the media spaces of its former colonies in the Maghreb region. With the launch of France 24 Arabic, the French national broadcaster's satellite channel dedicated to Arabic-speaking audiences worldwide, advocates for the state and its foreign policy towards the MENA region with considerable audience reach and impact. Similarly, in 2008, the Foreign Office of the British government launched BBC Arabic Television on satellite to further advocate on behalf of the government and extend regional influence among Arabic-speaking audiences. With the increasing involvement of Russian and Chinese governments in the MENA, we saw the subsequent launches of RT Arabic (Rusiya Al-Yawm TV) in 2007 and CGTN Arabic (China Global Television Network) in 2009, respectively. As opposed to their imperial precursors, contemporary broadcasting outlets from former colonial power centers have now been reimagined and rebranded as "objective" media entities with greater credibility than national and transnational regional equivalents due to their perceived disentanglement from the intricate local politics and rivalries. With employees from across the region's journalistic corps, they appeal to authenticity while implying editorial distance from the centers of power, garnering large audiences and high marks for credibility across the Middle East and North Africa. Besides casting them as innocent vis-à-vis the conflicts in the region, this view further underplays the political and economic interests of Britain, France, and the United States, and the extent to which their media enterprises in MENA are informed by their ambitions.

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In addition to the production of original media content for political ends, Western countries have also invested substantially in the development of local media infrastructure within MENA states with the stated objective of building capacities but with the overarching goal of strengthening their political hand domestically through patronage. This includes providing resources for transmitters, training for technical staff, workshops for journalists and reporters, and numerous other activities. In countries where the local government is at political odds with the funding nation, the tendency is for such media investments to be channeled toward the privatization of the local media sector to serve as an instrument for political opposition. Nevertheless, unlike the colonial period, mediated influence and imperial ambitions today involve much discursive subtlety and the often-convincing veneer of benevolent support for local aspirations.

Furthermore, major world powers, particularly the United States, are considerably at an advantage in the regions' media sector with the outsized influence of US-based digital media corporations such as Google, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and others. With tens of millions of daily users across MENA, these companies not only have access to the personal information and content production of these users but also have the ability to authorize or ban it in accordance with company policies, US laws, and domestic prohibitions. This means that much of the digital sovereignty is concentrated in the US and other Western countries. While there is growing competition from other global powers such as Russia and China—with one notable example being TikTok, the immensely popular video sharing social media application produced by Chinese company ByteDance—the lopsided impact of American internet companies remains the status quo. Furthermore, Western cyber-security companies are also the most sophisticated at providing tools for internet surveillance to allied regional governments to support their stability in the face of any public opposition or dissent. The synergistic interests between the US government and some regional governments such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar mean that their oil- and gas-rich economies have sufficient sovereign wealth to invest in American digital companies in Silicon Valley. Conversely, governments that are at odds with the United States, such as Iran, regularly obstruct the use of these platforms by their citizens on the account that they are being weaponized to foment dissent and destabilize their countries. Hence, while the media sectors and infrastructures have transformed considerably, the battle for public opinion in the MENA region continues unabated with competition between states often privileging the hegemonic powers of former colonial architecture. What was once the dominion of government officials has since been outsourced to corporations. In the wake of these transformations, the model for both political governance and media that pervades the region is now both neoliberal and authoritarian (with very few exceptions).

Perennial Revolution

Throughout the colonial periods in the MENA region, challenges to occupation were omnipresent but often lacked the infrastructure to produce and disseminate resistance to large segments of the population. The gradual waning of colonial presence and influence was due to confrontations with emancipatory movements and the demise of the colonizer's capacities to control empires. Particularly following the Second World War,

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this significantly shifted the balance of power across the region, creating an opening for revolutionary counter narratives. This was the first major wave of anticolonial uprising.

By the end of the 1960s, more countries in the region had transitioned toward some modicum of self-determination and self-governance. This period was characterized by the rise of anticolonial political sentiment and capacity to confront colonial infrastructures across the region was at an all-time high. Whether in Egypt, Syria, Algeria, Sudan, or Iraq, and Iran to name a few, the colonial legacies faced substantial challenges from a mobilized intelligentsia in solidarity with sovereignty movements with massive popular reach across most locales. Socialist revolutionary and loyal royalist ideologies split the spoils of post-colonial governance in the region as both approaches articulated and propagated a revolutionary anti- or postcolonial nationalist liberationist discourse. Whether in the form of armed struggle against the residual influence of French, British, and Italian colonizers (and their local functionaries) or the articulation of nationalist independence discourses, the shifting systems of governance across the region precipitated the reconstitution of politics along various iterations and manifestations of revolutionary discourse.

Such revolutionary discourses became a recognizable feature of a newly reimagined and burgeoning communication infrastructure. Some states in the region—including Egypt, Algeria, Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Iran—commenced their respective political sovereignty projects with the instrumentalization of anticolonial media. Whether through nationalist or pan-nationalist ideological stances, their adversarial disposition toward former colonies and their continued influence in the region were of considerable appeal to their constituencies and publics. A glaring example of this is Egypt's remarkably influential pan-Arab radio station *Sawt el 'Arab* (Voice of the Arabs), which dominated the airwaves until the 1967 war.⁸ By fomenting anticolonial resistance and Arab nationalism, these broadcasts were seen as considerably revolutionary against a backdrop of Western-dominated radio frequencies.⁹ For some of the newly independent states, their fragility necessitated the construction of a nationalist discourse and popular agenda to consecrate their identities. Some of these countries saw the encroachment of revolutionary politics sweeping the region through Nasserism, Arab nationalism, Baathism, socialism, and Islamism as outright threats to their territorial nationalism and perhaps even the integrity of their states.

Over the span of decades, with the complete consolidation of the media in the hands of the state, much of these counter-hegemonic revolutionary discourses have either waned or become institutionalized into the national identity.¹⁰ However, for many citizens of countries that espouse such political ideologies—such as Baathism in Iraq and Syria or Islamism in Iran—both the conviction and appeal have dissipated as the political landscapes change but leaderships remain stagnant. What was once nimble idealistic revolutionary fervor, such as the early days of Qaddafi's Libyan *Jamahiriyah*, morphed into a bureaucratic state that suppressed opposition and undermined rights in the name of these ideals.

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By the time the Arab uprisings erupted in 2010 and 2011 in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Yemen, Bahrain and elsewhere, the revolutionary movements were themselves confronting the once self-described revolutionary states. Local and regional movements calling for freedom, social justice, and an end to corruption, state oppression, and neoliberalism spread from one country to the next.¹¹ Each with its own nuances, local dynamics, political ecology, and sociocultural particularities, the revolutionary movements were determined to confront the entrenched state media institutions that had a near-complete monopoly on the communication environment in each country.¹² In just under a decade, these revolutionary movements have changed some aspects of the political landscape in their respective countries, but also precipitated a retrenchment of an even more muscular centralized state media apparatus. This has forced many of the youth-driven revolutionary movements to either cease to exist and regroup outside their home countries, or to coordinate on digital platforms and utilize social media as their means of propagating their messages.¹³ This has also left them vulnerable to opportunistic co-option by other countries whose interests are in politically destabilizing their states. Hence, almost a decade since the Arab uprisings, which rose against the repressive state apparatus, the revolutionary movements are often heavily reliant on the support of either other repressive regional states or global powers with less than benevolent ambitions.

Neoliberal Authoritarianism

In countries such as Syria, Egypt, and Bahrain, the state's control of the media has become a matter of existential importance, leading to the arrest, sentencing, torture, and exiling of journalists. Most states have responded to criticism regarding their media control by justifying the restrictions on the grounds of protecting national security. Yet, the most compelling structural maneuver is the deregulation of their media sector to allow loyalist and government-aligned investors and entrepreneurs to own and run networks, channels, and companies. This sleight of hand ensures the government appears firewalled from the media while at the same time outsourcing its state propaganda to these channels, networks and sites.¹⁴ With almost a thousand different Arabic satellite stations broadcasting across the region reflecting seemingly every identity, nationality, religious denomination, entertainment taste, and aesthetic, the neoliberal authoritarian media model that currently exists across the region ensures that each of these networks reflects, implicitly or explicitly, the perspectives espoused by the government of the country from which it is broadcasting.

For instance, Al-Jazeera's political discourse is perfectly harmonized with the policies of the government of Qatar,¹⁵ its host nation and primary benefactor. Similarly, Al-Arabiya reflects the political motives and agendas of Saudi Arabia, home to the station's owners. The same is true for Beirut-based pro-Syrian Al-Mayadeen, Egypt's state aligned private channels CBC, Al-Nahar, dmc, ONTV and Sada El-Balad. Dozens of other transnational channels broadcasting out of the Dubai Production City in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have their loyalties synchronized perfectly with their respective government-aligned ownership. Turkey's ruling AK Party of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has consolidated complete media control of its one entirely privately owned media sector, not through na-

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tionalization, but rather by rendering these politically and ideologically compliant or at best loyalist.¹⁶ Throughout the past thirty-five years, the Islamic Republic of Iran has, at various stages, experimented with the privatization of its once entirely centralized media system through the licensing of media companies loyal to the regime.

Whether commencing with a predominantly state-run media structure and gradually privatizing,¹⁷ or gradually reining in a once-boisterous private media, the outcomes have all too frequently been the same. Today the media configuration most observable across MENA allows for a considerable increase in the quantity and variety of sociocultural offerings in all programming. The arguments in favor of privatization and deregulation of media sectors globally, which often leads to the consolidation of such industries into monopolies, have often been anchored and justified on the premise that this culminates in greater diversity in content and programming.¹⁸ With convergence and monopolization in the media sector, powerful companies are able to produce greater content volume and do so through a growing number of platforms, channels, and outlets. This explains the remarkably large and seemingly wide-ranging productions from such companies as Disney, TimeWarner, NewsCorp, and Comcast which are responsible for the lion's share of audiovisual content produced from the United States to global audiences.¹⁹ Similarly, the neoliberal system of media governance that commenced in MENA with the advent of satellite in the late 1990s has resulted in the gradual proliferation of a dizzying array of media products across the spectrum of social, cultural, entertainment, and personal interests. However, conditions for eligibility to register and run such media operations are rarely stated publicly and decisions made for licensing are understood to be determined on the basis of proximity to the ruling government with jurisdiction of the media sector.²⁰ Nepotism and cronyism are rampant in these dealings with many of those investing in the media themselves being intimately involved in government either personally or through kinship.²¹ This is precisely how conformity and allegiance are guaranteed and wielded in this system. In the same way that the American-style corporate media system ensures owners, large advertising firms, and powerful financial backers of the networks are hardly scrutinized on their airwaves, so does the government-shackled neoliberal media system in the MENA region.

With authoritarianism rampant in the region, criticism of government is strictly prohibited and enforced through censorship, setting the news agenda, the careful framing of stories, and gate-keeping. With money from the oil- and gas-rich Gulf countries and Iran bankrolling a significant proportion of the major transnational media entities in the Middle East and North Africa, they ensure the political discourses espoused by these networks are consistent with their national priorities and foreign policies.²² This is also reflected in proxy conflicts and wars across the region where the media funded by one country or another consistently produce loyalist content. As competition over influence, ideology, and contemporary constructions of national identity escalates between the extraction-based economies of the Gulf, we can see this reflected in the coverage of media companies across the region. This is exemplified by the several-year-old embargo and standoff between Qatar and the Saudi-Emirati-Bahraini nexus of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Whether the competition translates into rivalries in the realms of geopolit-

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ical influence, ideological perspectives such as political Islamism, or contemporary constructions of branded nationalisms as identity, the media play a central role in the externalization of this competition. For this reason, media outlets owned or funded by either of these countries publicly espouse such competition through self-aggrandizing accounts of influence, ideology, and national identity. These expressions are consistent across networks of influence in the media whereby the rhetorical landscape on each outlet mirrors the politics of the network ownership, exemplifying the amalgam of both neoliberalism and authoritarianism.

With all these media outlets broadcasting via satellite beyond their state borders, they have become instruments of influence in other countries. Regional rivalries and state competition have precipitated conflicts that play out in the media—print, radio, television, and online. In some cases, countries invest or host entire media infrastructures to challenge their regional adversaries. Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the UAE have all rendered their countries home to media that are expressly hostile to their political rivals. Qatar's Al-Jazeera serves as an advocate for political change in rival countries but expresses congratulatory aggrandizement toward the political status quo in allied nations such as Turkey under the AK Party. Saudi Arabia and the UAE invest heavily in media that challenge Muslim Brotherhood-aligned groups across the region, including criticism of Qatari policies, Turkey, and subnational groups in Yemen, Libya, Bahrain, and Syria while propping up compatriot governments such as Egypt. Turkey's solidarity with Islamist political agendas explains its hosting of the majority of Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated television networks such as Mekameleen TV, Al-Sharq, and Watan TV that espouse enmity toward the state.

In circumstances where there is an ongoing militarized conflict, such as Libya, Syria, and Yemen, these media entities have essentially been weaponized in favor of one faction or another. For instance, Iranian news networks support Houthi insurgents in Yemen, Emirati channels support Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA), Qatari Al-Jazeera supports Syrian opposition militias, and Turkish networks reflect favorable depictions of both Libya's Tripoli-based government's armed factions and Syrian opposition Islamist militias. Other militias and armed groups, such as the Islamic State, Al-Qaeda, and Jabhat Al-Nusra, to name a few, continue to operate with some covert state and individual support with accusations leveled at Gulf governments whose citizens appear to provide material support to such militias. Most active armed groups and militias—such as the numerous Iran-loyal armed groups in Iraq, Jabhat Al-Nusra in Syria, Al-Qaeda in the Maghreb, Hezbollah in Lebanon, the HPG (People's Defense Forces) armed wing of the Kurdish Workers' Party in Turkey, or the anti-regime People's Mujahedin of Iran (MEK)—have developed considerably sophisticated online media platforms and operations that circulate propagandistic material including footage from the battlefields, recruitment videos, and personal testimonies sometimes on par with professional television production. As conflicts continue to rage across the region, revolutionary movements are increasingly synonymous with militarized insurrection supported by otherwise antirevolutionary governments.

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Yet the embroilment into regional politics has allowed many of these centralized authoritarian governments to reconstitute their image and resuscitate their revolutionary discourses, albeit under different circumstances. The Qatari state, an absolute monarchy with no semblance of democratic practice, flaunts its revolutionary credentials as a staunch supporter of Islamist opposition groups in a dozen countries across the region and a strong advocate for the Muslim Brotherhood. The Egyptian state itself an antirevolutionary authoritarian republic dominated by the military establishment under President Abdel-Fattah El-Sisi derives and performs its perceived revolutionary credence from having come to power on the heels of what it refers to as the June 30 Revolution in 2013 against the Muslim Brotherhood government of Mohammed Morsi. Furthermore, it also wears revolutionary camouflage in the form of determined support for Khalifa Haftar's renegade militias, the opposition Libyan National Army facing off against the UN-recognized Government of National Accord. Even the Saudi Arabian government under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman poses as revolutionary by systematically appropriating and monopolizing social change agendas including the erosion of gender-discriminatory policies and laws long advocated for by activists. In its own way, the Turkish Republic under Erdoğan's AK Party at once both undermines Kurdish revolutionary activism domestically while advocating for revolutionary Islamism in Egypt, Palestine, Syria, Libya and elsewhere. The Islamic Republic of Iran performs counter-hegemonic revolutionary politics in the Gulf and against US "imperial interests in the region" but exercises statist political intransigence in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. Hence, revolutionary legitimacy across MENA is increasingly more vacuous with states reconstituting their own ideologies and interests as revolutionary politics to be deployed against their rivals across the region and beyond. All these dynamics are reflected both implicitly and explicitly through the media operations of each respective state.

Nevertheless, many of the region's politically unaffiliated youth remain disenchanted with both their states' often-fictitious revolutionary credentials and the states attempting to co-opt their independent justice-based ideals. More recently, examples of such movements that categorically defy appropriation include the Sudanese revolutionary protests that toppled the government of Omar al-Bashir and the Algerian revolution that brought down the government of Abdelaziz Bouteflika, both in April of 2019. The Iraqi revolution that erupted in October 2019 has also stood apart from all centers of power, thereby challenging the interests and interventions of both the United States and Iran in their country. These revolutionary movements cannot be reduced to statist ideologies. Instead, most of these movements have had little to no coverage in the mainstream media across the region. Rather, they continue to resort to the few tools they have at their disposal—namely social media platforms, messenger apps, video-sharing sites, and other apps—to mobilize online deliberation and confront both iterations of intransigent neoliberal authoritarianism.²³

The remarkable political consistency between each state's foreign policy and the mainstream media discourses emanating from it exemplifies the neoliberal authoritarianism that is the new status quo across MENA,²⁴ with Tunisia being a notable exception.

Frameworks and Methodologies

While the opening salvo in broadcasting and electronic media in MENA was shepherded by the colonial powers, it was revolutionary discourse of yesteryear that gave the media landscape political and ideological gravitas, and more recently the rise of neoliberalism that cemented its structural components that continue to this day.

It is, henceforth, imperative for analyses of this kind to be firmly grounded in a nuanced comprehension and dynamic application of the two most influential frameworks for the understanding of media institutions and their discourses—the political economy of communication and critical cultural studies. Before explaining each of their conditions and providing tangible examples, it is important to note that this chapter does not privilege one methodology at the expense of the other. Rather the most compelling, informative, and wholly significant works of media research in the region are those that take both the political economic and critical cultural dimensions into genuine consideration.

Political Economy of Communication

Inspired largely by Marxist critiques of knowledge production, research on media and communication practices has often raised questions about the ways in which those who possess power wield it to affect both the output of these outlets and impact public opinion. The works of Harold Innis,²⁵ Marshall McLuhan,²⁶ and Dallas Smythe²⁷ are of lasting impact on how we comprehend media ownership and the economic influence that has on communication processes whether through gate-keeping, setting the news agenda, or rendering censorship a norm. Through media ownership, the exercise of power and the pursuit of economic influence are substantially impacted, often to the detriment of public interest and an impoverishment of both diversity and accuracy. The writings of Schiller and McChesney further elaborate on the ways capital concentration, legal deregulation, financial convergence, institutional conglomerization, and corporate consumerism turn media and communication into mass producers of commodities at the expense of social responsibility, social justice, and egalitarianism.²⁸ Such critiques of major corporate centralization of media organizations reflect how the uneven distribution of capital is leveraged and its impact on coverage, censorship, and other forms of discursive control.²⁹

Unfortunately, there has been a significant dearth in the research and publication of works that analyze media in MENA from a political economic perspective. This can be explained through the incredible restrictions and risks faced by journalists and scholars alike in pursuing information about media ownership, concentration, and where power is located in these remarkably influential institutions. Furthermore, the near-universal absence of laws that protect the public access to information across much of the region ensures that networks of ownership and funding are extremely opaque and often speculative. Nevertheless, the works of Boyd, Sakr, Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi, Semati, as well as Gher and Amin are important forays into the characterizations of the structures of media institutions and their political economic conditions.³⁰

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More recently, Della Ratta, Sakr, and Skovgaard-Petersen collaborated to bring together an important edited volume about the rise of communication conglomerates by examining the emergence of regional media moguls and the influence they wield in their respective countries and transnationally.³¹ Irrespective of the system of governance, each country in the Middle East and North Africa has seen a startling rise in the concentration of media assets in the hands of a small number of people or corporations, most being extremely proximate to the centers of political power. Given that this is the pervading structure in the region with major implications for representation of power, people, conflict, and identity, there is urgency in investigating these questions.

The operations of these institutions are responsible for the mass production of knowledge in the form of mediatized content. Whether they are extensions of state public affairs activities or seemingly independent journalistic establishments—most are governed by structural characteristics that predetermine the influence and impact of resource-rich capacities that anchor their work. The structures of funding, revenue-generation, and ownership are intricately and intimately connected to both the structure and function of these media operations.

Historically, and throughout the majority of the twentieth century—the formative period in the development of print and electronic media in the MENA region—most state media operations were treated as extensions of politicized government agendas. Because their employment structure, chain-of-command approach to operations management, and most importantly their exclusive reliance on governmental funds for labor costs, resources, facilities, hardware, connectivity, and distribution, these institutions were accurately categorized as statist both in configuration and performance. The political intonations were informed largely by the economic dependency on state apparatuses. Whether in Nasser and Sadat's Egypt, Baathist Syria and Iraq, or the pre-1990s Gulf countries, the political economic structure of media across the region mapped almost perfectly on to the system of governance. This means that ownership, funding, personnel management, and resource allocation were the exclusive dominion of the state apparatus.

In the last thirty years, we have seen a gradual and purposeful deregulation of the media industry across the region, with the rise of media entrepreneurs, venture capital in the broadcasting sector, and the diversification of major companies into the media sector. This is, of course, happening under the watchful eye and enthusiastic endorsement of the state. Despite the seemingly unrelenting proliferation of outlets, platforms, and networks, the ability to function and produce content in any given country is tightly regulated through licenses and permits. These ensure operational conformity and political uniformity, effectively discouraging or silencing opposition and dissent. The political economic approach to media analyses exposes through organization, structural, and institutional critique the flow of capital and labor forces that underlie the regional operations of media and journalism. This approach places revenue generation practices and the investment of resources toward political influence at the center of discourses on the contemporary history of politics and identity in the region.

Critical Cultural Studies

While the political economic analyses of media and communication in the MENA region unpack the structural conditions that make institutions of knowledge production and journalistic output tick, they nevertheless do little to reconcile these patterns with the content generated and distributed across these platforms and beyond. It also doesn't account for the representation of various political, social, economic, and cultural expressions and how these inform and shape public opinion. Growing out of the influence of Foucauldian critiques of knowledge and power³² and Gramscian analyses of hegemonic production,³³ the radical criticality and interdisciplinarity of cultural studies constitutes the second methodological approach that elucidates how media messages are created and comprehended. This is best exemplified by the significant contribution of cultural theorist Stuart Hall and the Birmingham School to the explorations of discourse construction and representation and how these manifest in communication practices and mediated utterances.³⁴ This methodology is translated into a set of empirical linguistic and semiotic tools to examine the way media content is produced, meaning is constructed, and ideology is affirmed. Stuart Hall's interrogation of representation placed discourse at the center of the production of knowledge and hence the reproduction of dominant discourses and consecration of hegemonic power. This both coincided and intersected seamlessly with Hall's contemporary, Edward Said, who was deconstructing discourses of colonial power and how they imagined and reproduced the other in the Orient.³⁵ This developing area of research and criticism also coincided and dovetailed with multiple intellectual currents of cultural interrogation by the likes of bell hooks, Jean Baudrillard, Pierre Bourdieu, Raymond Williams, and Gayatri Spivak, to name a few.

Analytical frameworks are imperative to analyze how media and communication content and representations are an affirmation of the ideological constructions that reinforce the dominant paradigms.³⁶ For instance, much of Western media coverage of the Middle East and North Africa is remarkably similar in its reinforcement of stereotypical orientalist tropes. Conversely, regional, national, and local depictions of similar dynamics and phenomena are often inclined to affirm prevalent and pervasive perspectives and constructions about the region. Whether in the form of dismissal of criticism over human rights violations, the outright advocacy for state or non-state violence and militarization, the production of sectarian narratives, or the frivolous and aloof parading of privilege and power, problematic representations and codifications are aplenty in a cacophonous media landscape. With thousands of journalistic pieces being produced from and about the region every day, there is an urgent impetus to comprehend how these competing so-called "first drafts of history" construct and represent realities through discourses that embody or are seen as hegemonic frames, negotiated codes, or oppositional positions.³⁷ Through critical discourse analyses (CDA) of media—pioneered by the work of Van Dijk, Fairclough, and Wodak—and other methodological textual instruments to explore how meanings are imbued in mediated content, such analyses have contributed greatly to the way in which identity, gender, race, sexuality, and other attributes are politicized, demonized, weaponized, or obfuscated in media content.³⁸

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To envisage how the critical cultural studies framework applies to the analyses of media and communication in the contemporary Middle East and North Africa, explorations of news and entertainment alike, both mainstream and alternative, would constitute the bedrock of the research field.³⁹ Cultural studies entails a nuanced reading of the myriad expressions and creative productions, from the literary to the artistic. At the local, national, and regional levels, the production of artistic material, both mainstream and independent music, novels, short stories, spoken word, poetry in its classical and colloquial forms, sculpture, handicrafts, paintings, graffiti, street and wall art, contemporary folklore, theatrical performance, caricatures, memes, and user-generated digital content are but a drop in the ocean of the cultural expressions being created in communities across the Middle East and North Africa. Whether these are best-selling songs, independent bootlegged *mahraganat* (inner city Egyptian autotuned digital recordings), *anasheed* (religious chants and recitations), or Turkish television series romanticizing Ottoman history, these are part of the region's complex cultural inventory and register.

Whether these expressions reflect populist, separatist, communalist, or humanist tendencies, these are the expressions of communities in flux whose histories are constantly being contemplated, articulated, and possibly reconfigured. Many of these productions and expressions reflect discursive and ideological inclinations and proclivities.⁴⁰ Whether they articulate an affirmation or critique of identity politics, pan-Arabism, territorial nationalism, subnational identities, minoritarian allegiances, religious affiliations, denominations, membership of sects, cults, communities of faith, or belongings to ethnic and racial genealogies, the range and potentialities of such cultural expressions is near infinite in possibility. A significant proportion of these expressions are individual and collective articulations of gendered critiques leveled against the paternalism, patriarchy, and chauvinism of states, authorities, religious figures, families, working spaces, and societies at large.

Some of these expressions are Nubian, Amazigh, and Kurdish communities resuscitating their cultural and linguistic heritage as a form of nationalist identification. For instance, following the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, the predominantly Kurdish north became increasingly self-governing with substantive investment in Kurdish language instruction and cultural media programming. The Arab uprisings of 2010 and 2011 shepherded an incredible proliferation of communitarian expression from regions and groups often neglected. One example of this is among the Amazigh communities of Tunisia, Morocco, and Algeria who have pushed for recognition and rights since the uprisings in each of their respective countries. This has heralded a resurgence of subcultural identification, pride, and interest in increased self-representation in the media.

Other communities are turning to exclusively religious jihadist narratives to justify newfound commitments to struggle against political adversaries. While some of these expressions reflect attempts at imagining a futuristic utopia for some communities, others are staunch attempts to recreate the nostalgic past. The immeasurable diversity of such expressions means that there will always be a deficit in the scholarly literature that attempts to ascertain and archive these mediated productions. Nevertheless, their theorization is well under way across many disciplines including communication studies where

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the important work of Marwan Kraidy on hybridity,⁴¹ reality television,⁴² and the contentious politics of the body,⁴³ alongside writings on Iran's Islamic revolutionary discourse and innovation,⁴⁴ and Tarik Sabry's collective project on defining Arab cultural studies, are just a few of the critical forays into such areas.⁴⁵

This is also the terrain for hybrid and mixed identities, glocalized patterns of living, and creolized ways of communicating. From the use of classical Arabic and local dialects, to code-switching between slang and the languages of former colonizers, the realms of cultural overlap and exchange become opportunities for unique and informative expressions. This is particularly evident in the cultural expressions of communities in North Africa where—over decades—local Amazigh languages, Arabic, French, and sometimes Spanish have created complex linguistic topographies with different dialects, vernaculars, vocabularies, accents, syntax, colloquialisms, and slang. As Appadurai explains, much of these complex utterances and hybrid cultural spaces and productions are themselves the outcome of the movement of “scapes.” Whether it is the movement of people (ethnoscapes), technology (technoscapes), money (financescapes), images (mediascapes), or ideas (ideoscapes)—these mediatized expressions are the product of diasporic experiences, the transfer of ideas, commodities, and symbols across territories.⁴⁶ They are at times also reflections of utterances that have at their core the experiences of migration, occupation, exile, and displacement.

The critical cultural framework also provides the tools to examine how political discourse is manufactured and encoded in mediated messages—whether in the form of news journalism, song, poetry, cinematic production, or other forms of knowledge. Political intonations and aspirations can be examined as tropes reflective of either the statist or oppositional perspectives. They could be Baathist, Nasserist, royalist, Islamist, revolutionary, socialist, capitalist, nihilist, consumerist, or an amalgam of these ideological perspectives. In environs where these discourses are the statist status quo, they are propagated by the government and constitute the sanctioned foundational expressions of those in power. However, depending on the locale and power dynamics, what would be considered an oppositional frame would differ depending on context.

For example, a particular statist discourse in one country can be an oppositional one in another country. Under the Baathist Syrian regime context, Islamist expressions can be considered counter-hegemonic and revolutionary. Alternatively, in the Islamist AK Party-controlled Turkey, religious ideological positionality and neo-Ottoman narratives are the prevailing status quo, rendering its targeted Kurdish, secularist, nationalist, Gulenist, and diasporic opposition rivals counter-hegemonic. Sometimes, the layers and faultlines of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic contestation are so intertwined and complex so as to make the dichotomization of protagonist/antagonist difficult, if not largely obsolete. For instance, Kurdish identitarian politics is at once counter-hegemonic vis-à-vis the Turkish republic but while allied with superpowers such as the United States or Russia, becomes embroiled in the exercise of hegemonic power.

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The cultural approach should, by no means, be perceived as purely textual or limited to semiotic products and the construction of ideological messages. Rather, the importance of nuanced forays into sociocultural contexts around mediation necessitate a curiosity about audiences and publics and the impact reception of such content. For this reason, sociological and anthropological methodologies that anchor the personhood of audiences and readings of mediated narratives are absolutely critical. Qualitative methods such as interviews, focus groups, and especially media ethnographies⁴⁷ reveal the ways in which individuals, families, communities, and groups in society negotiate and contest mediated discourses and how these inform their views and choices on morality, values, identity, politics, and lifestyle.⁴⁸ Furthermore, increasingly, research that focuses on expressions through social media platforms,⁴⁹ blogs,⁵⁰ user-generated videos,⁵¹ memes,⁵² and other circulating content is serving as a barometer of the prevalence and characteristics of opinions in the public domain.⁵³ Beyond this, the sophistication with which cultural production reflects new literacies and literatures renders possible complex and convoluted ways of recreating digital modernity by way of hackers, trolls, whistleblowers, voyeurs, and other embodied subjectivities.⁵⁴

With the boom in big data analytics and other quantitative methodologies that attempt to process large sample sizes (or even entire populations) becoming the norm, audiences' social, cultural, political, and behavioral expressions are constructed population patterns. While such studies are incredibly informative and provide insight into the salience and resonance of some arguments, perspectives, ideologies, affinities, and actions, their ability to reflect on nuances or showcase the interstitial negotiations that take place at the organic social levels remains limited. These limitations are largely the function of large-scale methodological instrumentation that relies heavily on the generalizability of phenomena, the rendering of algorithmic patterns of action and expression, the reduction of variability into variables, and the essentialization of characteristics into categories. That said, the tools used by big data analytics both in the corporate social media sector or in the social sciences will likely refine these incongruences and incapacitations, but will constantly struggle with the immeasurability of multifactorial expressions and the complexity of their underlying sociocultural and political dimensions.

From the preservation of traditional arts to novel forms of cultural expression, cultural studies provides a shift in the frame of communication from one of the study of media to the study of mediation. The incredible resonance of visual cultural expression⁵⁵ from the photographic to the architectural to the digital is understated and often overlooked in the exploration of contemporary historical experience.⁵⁶ With the dizzying proliferation of internet technology and widespread generation of user-produced content, the range of visual expressions and the intersections of cultural production are near infinite in possibility and immeasurably variable. This both poses a challenge to traditional means of knowledge production and offers opportunities for the further entrenchment of such knowledge given the extent to which it adapts to and appropriates the tropes of technological innovations such as social media.

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To forge such understandings of contemporary histories of the MENA region through mediation is an undertaking that necessitates critical discursive explorations of all forms of expression and knowledge production across all spectra. From formal rhetorical discourse espoused by state institutions and their extremities, to small-scale indigenous colloquial expressions of despondency, and everything in between, there is no shortage of testimonials, artifacts, and mediated creative production that, when explored, can be instructive to our comprehension of the resonance of sociological, political, cultural, and economic perspectives on lived experience in the MENA region.

Conclusion

With disenchanting youth protests proliferating across the region, from the Arab uprisings of 2011 to more recent revolutionary mobilizations in Algeria, Sudan, Iraq, and Lebanon, the role that media plays in obfuscating, promoting, and admonishing these movements is under increased scrutiny in an increasingly cacophonous media space. This chapter aimed to center the examination and analyses of media and communication practices in MENA as a vital dimension of how we understand the way power is configured and wielded in the region as well as comprehending how communities represent and embody their perspectives, aspirations, and identities. With the proliferation of online platforms and increased internet penetration across MENA, there is a marked amplification of independent voices operating beyond political, social, cultural, and religious taboos. Yet, in almost equal measure, institutions of the state and apparatuses of social control have markedly scrutinized, securitized, and surveilled these very voices with increasing efficacy.

This chapter argues that to explore the ramifications of these patterns, we must utilize interdisciplinary methodologies in the study of media that unpack the political, social, cultural, and economic circumstances that make these conditions possible. The political economy of communication provides the tools necessary to explore how the amalgam of privatization, convergence, and authoritarianism in the media sector are significant determinants of how local politics, histories, and identities are grappled with and in some instances explicitly engineered. The entangled relationships between authoritarian states and neoliberal economies are one of the critical angles begging further analyses, particularly in the Middle East and North Africa, where the obfuscation of financial control in the media industry and the infiltration of networks of nepotistic ownership and patronage are characteristically high.

With evocations of nationalism and revolution unfolding across the region, communities are embroiled in processes that redefine the notions of citizenship, identity, ideology, and citizenship. As these air out in the form of mediated communications on the airwaves and online, another interdisciplinary methodology of critical value for the examination of these expressions is critical cultural studies. By presenting exemplary ways to comprehend how discourses perpetuate or perturb power, cultural studies expands the analytical frame to include the multitude of expressions and utterances across platforms—from

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graffiti to social media commentary, and from television dramas to sound studies. With the advent of internet technology and platforms designed to amplify self-expression, collective organizing, and knowledge mobilization, individuals and collectives across the Middle East and North Africa are actively engrossed in complex practices of embodiment and the production of cultural artefacts.

The historicization of media and communication in MENA helps us reflect on the ways by which revolutionary discourses are perennially reimaged and propagated by authoritarian regimes, their adversaries, and citizenry. The colonial legacies form the backdrop and foundation of discursive production across the region followed by the rise of anticolonial statist media that gradually consolidated power and centralized communication output. Understanding these historical periods informs us of the existing communication structures and the manner in which they operate and self-perpetuate. As political rivalries, conflicts, and revolutions continue to unfold across MENA, the prospects of the collective imagination and construction of realities are often the product of what is deemed possible in the media. As the media become the conduit for much of the knowledge produced about politics, culture, economics, and society in the MENA region, it is fundamental to the exploration of the ascendant neoliberal authoritarian condition and the revolutionary currents it both confronts and co-opts, that we not understate the way contemporary history is being mediated.

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Notes:

(1.) For more information about the history and inception of Al-Jazeera, see El-Nawawy and Iskandar (2003). Refer to Zayani's (2019) edited volume and Iskandar (2006) for additional analyses of the network's controversial politics, motivations, and coverage of conflicts. To explore Al-Jazeera's construction of an imaginary audience in the region, see Matthews and Al-Habsi (2018) study on the channel's approach to newsworthiness.

(2.) So much has been noted and researched about the role that technology firms and their platforms have played in the organization and capacity building stages of the Arab uprisings that commenced in 2010 and 2011 in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Yemen, Bahrain and beyond. Beyond the technologically deterministic argument that Facebook precipitated the revolution, some of the extensive research that highlights this dynamics

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include Aslan Ozgul (2019), el-Nawawy and Khamis (2013), Aouragh (2012), Bebawi and Bossio (2014), and Hudson, Iskandar and Kirk (2016).

(3.) The launch of Radio Bari's Arabic language broadcasting and how it reflected Fascist Italy's ambitions in the Middle East are best reviewed by Arielli (2010).

(4.) A concise review of international broadcasting across the region during this period and beyond is offered by Boyd (1976).

(5.) For a detailed account Fascist Italy's campaign to reach audiences in the region during the interwar period and their competition from British and French content productions, see Marzano (2012)

(6.) Much has been published about the US government's broadcasting outreach to the Middle East and North Africa, including the most contemporary iterations of these efforts in the form of satellite television station Al-Hurra and entertainment-based Radio Sawa. For more information on these, see Douglas and Neal (2013) and Seib (2016).

(7.) For a discussion of the cultural discourses employed by US government public diplomacy efforts to the Middle East, see Iskandar (2020).

(8.) See Boyd (1975) for the sociopolitical history of Sawt al-Arab during this phase of Egyptian broadcasting and its impact in fomenting anticolonial and revolutionary narratives throughout the Arab world.

(9.) Abdelrahman (2002) has produced some of the most extensive accounts of the history of 1960s and 1970s pan-Arabist broadcasting with reflections on the politicization of revolutionary narratives and what she describes as the "social responsibility" imperative for media at the time.

(10.) Cherkaoui (2017) situates conflict and war at the center of the competition between media practice in the Middle East and the West with CNN and Al-Jazeera serving as a backdrop. He also tackles the journalistic mandates of these networks and how they frame one another.

(11.) See Hudson, Iskandar, and Kirk (2016) for a collection of essays addressing the run up to the Arab uprisings, the media and digital build-up to the protests, and how the ground was prepared for confrontations between the state and its domestic subjects as the latter demanded rights, freedom, justice, and economic betterment.

(12.) For a broad engagement with the various (and often conflicting) accounts of the uprisings in the region, see Iskandar and Haddad (2013). Bebawi and Bossio (2014) offer greater focus on the social media components of journalistic practice around the uprisings.

(13.) Wheeler (2017) tackles the role that digital innovation and cyberactivism played in shifting circumstances around authoritarianism in the Arab uprisings.

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(14.) Sakr (2002).

(15.) See Iskandar (2006) for an examination of Al-Jazeera's approach to coverage that highlights the contradictory relationship toward the Qatari government by debunking the view that the large network constitutes an alternative medium.

(16.) Read Adaklı (2009) and Akser and Baybars-Hawks (2012) for richer context on the Turkish political communication scene.

(17.) Yesil (2016) documents the privatization and commercialization of the Turkish media as reflections of a neoliberal and authoritarian state.

(18.) See Schiller (1989) and McChesney (2008) as well as their other writings about the political economy of media.

(19.) McChesney, R. (2008).

(20.) Gher and Amin's (1999) survey of the media scene in the region forecasted the new media innovations and the conditions they precipitated in terms of media ownership, licensing, and identity based diversity.

(21.) See Akser and Baybars-Hawks (2012) and Adaklı (2009) for detailed explorations of the move toward neoliberal authoritarianism in the Turkish state media.

(22.) Elnawawy and Iskandar (2003), Hafez (2008), and Hafez (2001) all offer differing but complimentary studies on the persistent and intrusive role of the state on the national and regional media landscape.

(23.) Iskandar (2019) offers a recent assessment of the revolutionary youth engagement happening online almost a decade since the Arab uprising.

(24.) Della Ratta, Sakr, and Skovgaard-Petersen's (2015) edited volume offers the single most comprehensive account of the role of ownership and media moguls in controlling both the message and the audience across the region.

(25.) Harold Innis' significant contribution to the political economy of communication and helped shape this approach to inquiry by examining the structural inequities embedded in the systems of media ownership and how then inform journalistic production and bias. One such publication is second edition of his seminal work *The Bias of Communication* (2008).

(26.) Fitzgerald (2001).

(27.) Melody (1994).

(28.) Schiller (1989) and McChesney (2008).

(29.) Sreberny (2008).

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(30.) In addition to other writings that tackle the structural configurations of media ownership in MENA, Boyd's (1999) work on the Gulf countries, Sakr's (2002) work on Egypt and Saudi Arabia, and Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi (1994) as well as Semati's (2007) work on Iran are particularly informative.

(31.) Della Ratta, Sakr, and Skovgaard-Petersen (2015).

(32.) Foucault and Gordon (1980).

(33.) Gramsci (1971).

(34.) Hall (1974) and Hall (1991).

(35.) Said's *Orientalism* (1978), among other works contributed significantly to Hall's writings about representation and the colonial project.

(36.) Iskandar (2007).

(37.) See Hall's (1991) work on the encoding of messages in media constructions and their decoding through audience engagements is foundational to cultural studies.

(38.) See such works as Fairclough (1995), van Dijk (1997), and Wodak and Meye (2015) for theorizations, operationalizations, and implementations of critical discourse analysis as a methodology.

(39.) By moving beyond taxonomic proscriptive categorical approaches to understanding media in the region, Iskandar (2007) argues in favor of the importance of a cultural studies approach.

(40.) Sabry and Khalil (2019) hone in on the notions of space and temporality to ask important questions about culture both in time and across locales in an informative collection of essays on the media and publicness.

(41.) Kraidy (2008) tackles the faultlines of transculturalism in media production and community engagement across the region, raising theoretical questions around the veracity of hybridity and glocalization as explanatory and analytical tools.

(42.) Kraidy's (2010) writings on reality television exposed cultural constructions that inform nationalism and other identity-based productions across the region. From game shows and competitions to music entertainment and theatrical narratives, his work unpacks the range of discourses and their reception from social taboos to political posturing.

(43.) Kraidy's (2016) writings on the uprisings across the Arab world focused specifically on the construction and inscription of the corporeal body as a means of contention, both figuratively and literally. At once, the body becomes a medium, content, and metaphor.

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(44.) Semati (2007) and Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi (1994) both look at the Islamic revolution in Iran and the complexities of balancing ideology, politics, and technological innovation.

(45.) Sabry's (2012) important collection lays the foundation for cultural studies as an approach to understanding mediated production in the Arab world.

(46.) Appadurai's (1990) framework explores the importance of movement as a prism from which knowledge about cultural production, identity, politics, artifacts, material, and other criteria are globalized through spatial transfer.

(47.) Like Kraidy's writings on media ethnography, Zayani (2011) argues in favor of the interpretive value of participant observation as a methodological framework.

(48.) One landmark work of media ethnography from the region is Lila Abu-Lughod's 2005 book *Dramas of Nationhood* where she examines the way communities in Upper Egypt reflect and interpret their identities through the prisms of national drama series broadcast on state television.

(49.) Herrera (2014) and Wheeler and Wheeler (2017), and Wagner and Gainous (2013).

(50.) Ulrich (2009).

(51.) Comninos (2011).

(52.) Using the Egyptian revolutionary milieu as an exemplar, Iskandar (2014) argues that memes are a novel manifestation of cultural bricolage with political implications in many contexts across the MENA region.

(53.) Shirazi (2013).

(54.) El-Ariss (2018).

(55.) See Khatib (2013) and other works on the role that visual representation plays in constructing political discourses and cultural mores. The writings here are informed by journalistic imperatives.

(56.) Shirazi (2013).

Adel Iskandar

Simon Fraser University