
📌 CURRENT ISSUE — Volume 8 Issue 1 – 2014

Gunter, Barrie and Dickinson, Roger (Eds) - *News Media in the Arab World: A Study of 10 Arab and Muslim Countries*, Bloomsbury, New York and London, 2013 ISBN 978-1-4411-7466-6

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News Media in the Arab World: A Study of 10 Arab and Muslim Countries is an edited collection that looks into the historical development of mainstream news media in ten Arab countries. This book provides snapshots of their media systems, highlighting the issues and challenges facing news media in each of these countries.

In the introduction chapter, the editors Barrie Gunter and Roger Dickinson discuss how the media landscape in the Arab region has changed as a result of new media technologies. They argue that there is an existing disjunction between these technologies, such as TV satellite television and internet, and the “realities of Arab politics and societies”. This is an important point in relation to the flourishing of satellite television channels and the expansive use of social media witnessed during the Arab Spring protests, yet the realities on the ground – such as government censorship – do not assist in fulfilling the promises that such technologies bring.

The authors also point out that there are disparities in media usage between various Arab countries and hence to assume that the Arab world is uniform, is problematic. In this light, they discuss the challenges to establishing an effective pan-Arab identity, which include having a distinct Arab news culture that is different to that of Western news styles and reporting. These differences include the social divisions and rewards available to journalists as well as the varying social and political status of men and women in the Arab world. These ongoing challenges are necessary to take into account in order to successfully address the development of a pan-Arab news identity.

The book starts off with an historic account of the various media systems in the Gulf countries. The authors of this chapter, Khalid Al-Jaber and Barrie Gunter, provide an overview of the Kuwaiti, Qatari, Emarati, Bahraini, Omani and Saudi press. Although brief, this overview provides an understanding of how the media systems evolved in these countries. The chapter goes on to look into the historic emergence of radio, television, and national news agencies, outlining its promoters and challenges. This chapter is an example of this book addressing gaps in the literature on parts of the Arab world largely under researched. Although a brief account of the media environment in the GCC countries, the chapter serves to offer an historic and current understanding of news media in this important economic hub.

The chapter on news in Iraq, is another example of how this book addresses parts of the Middle East not been extensively researched because of the political turmoil Iraq has experienced in the past two decades. Ahmed Al-Rawi and Barrie Gunter include an analysis of 857 election news stories, thus providing a considerable sample study. The study highlights what the authors call a “disappointing reality” of the Iraqi media environment. They point out that media outlets, and in turn their journalists, are dependent on political sponsors. As a result, each media outlet in Iraq performs journalistic allegiance to the political voice sponsoring it. This study, a welcome addition to the literature due to its importance in shedding light on the media in Iraq, offers a somber account of the media environment there.

In another chapter, Zaki Hasan Nuseibeh and Roger Dickinson discuss the emergence and development of Palestinian media. They argue that the media there continue to thrive and develop despite the restrictions and limitations they have operated within. And just like their people, “the Palestinian media have not been free”. This chapter offers an historic account looking at the media in Palestine since the Ottoman Empire, through to the British Mandate, on to its operation under Israeli occupation and the Palestinian authority. This chapter is mainly useful because it includes a study on the penetration and use of internet in Palestine. It also explains how news media have been used politically by different factions and for what purposes, shedding further light on the use of political communication by Palestinians.

Although Egypt has been in the spotlight recently, its inclusion as a case study in this book is necessary. Hamza Mohammed and Barrie Gunter describe the media systems and developments and how they operate in relation to the political systems at play. The authors look into the changes in Egyptian media systems as a result of the recent political upheavals, and the challenges that have arisen as a result. Like other chapters, this chapter goes through the development of the Egyptian press historically from the rule of Nasser, Sadat and Mubarak, up until recent developments of the media under the rule of the military council.

New media has specifically played an important role in recent Egyptian politics, something which has also grabbed international attention. This chapter looks into the use of new media from 1993 to the rise of an Egyptian virtual society and its impact on the public agenda. The relationship between bloggers and established media is also discussed. The authors point out that initially the relationship between the two was “toxic” but later developed to a more cooperative association, noting that this is because the virtual society could not be silenced.

The last of the case studies addressed in this book is in relation to Libya. Mokhtar Elareshi and Julian Mathews discuss the Libyan media environment with a focus on the emergence of new media and its role in the recent political changes. Specifically, the authors look into patterns of news consumption in Libya. This detailed study highlights “the importance of perceptions of the credibility of news sources for news consumers and their news consumption”. Such a study is significant not only as a Libyan case study but also because of its useful methodological approach.

Overall, the merit in this book lies in its ability to provide an up-to-date overview of the media in the Arab world, taking into account the recent changes brought about by the Arab Spring and the prominent use of new media throughout the recent protests. In addition, the case studies covering troubled areas in the region such as Iraq and Palestine, provide an insight into the workings of media systems which are usually not covered in the literature. The editors and the authors offer the reader a better understanding of how the media systems differ in each Arab country, stressing that the media in the Arab world is not homogenous, rather that it needs to be addressed on a case-by-case basis.

About the reviewer:

Dr Saba Bebawi is a journalism and media researcher with research interests in the role of media in democracy building, and media power. She holds a PhD on the topic of international news and alternative representation from the University of Melbourne, an MA research on media policy for community radio from Queensland University of Technology (QUT), and an MA in Communications from Monash University. Dr Bebawi has practical experience as both a broadcast and print journalist within Australia and internationally since 1995. She has previously held academic positions at Monash University in Australia and Zayed University in the UAE. Saba is currently a lecturer in Journalism at Swinburne University in Melbourne. Email: sbewawi@swin.edu.au