Book Review

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Arab Media – Power and Weakness provides an assessment of the emergent field of Arab media studies. The 13 articles of the volume, most written by veterans in the field, discuss issues related to the effects, audiences, contexts, ethics, economy, law and culture of Arab media. The book's introduction by editor Kai Hafez ties this plethora of material together in an ambitious attempt to outline current research on the links between Arab politics, society and media, and to point to some of the conclusions and problems we can extract from the literature. Hafez is interested in how the political economy structures the content of media, in the production process itself, as well as in the effects media have on politics and society.

The aim of assessing Arab media research some 15 years after the launch of al-Jazeera and eight years after 9/11, the two principal events that spawned broad scholarly interest in Arab media, runs through the book's chapters, several of which (by Muhammad Ayish, Tarik Sabry and Hussein Amin) are dedicated to an overview and analysis of the field. The editor must be commended for thus giving the book a coherence, which means that, to some extent, it reads as one long discussion of related debates. A recurrent theme in the book is the lack of empirically informed studies, on the one hand, and of theoretical sophistication on the other. This is evidence that Arab media studies does indeed suffer from teething problems, as Hafez puts it in his introduction. Media are complex social phenomena with wide-ranging manifestations and ramifications. Where to look? Which particular problems to focus on? And, most acutely, which disciplinary tools and literature to apply?

The most obvious question, to most people, has been whether or not new media contribute to democratization and political liberalization. The simple answer seems to be no, or at least not very much. New media like satellite TV and internet-

based media have proven powerful in the sense that they set the agenda for political discussion across the Arab world in new ways, and that they have allowed critical voices to emerge from what was, from 1954 to 1990, roughly, a media scene dominated by mobilizing incentives. But they are weak because they have failed to translate that agenda-setting ability into democratic changes in the political realm. Discourse cannot replace action, and apparently cannot even spur action to a very large extent. The reason for this, as Marc Lynch and several others point out, is a combination of continued state control over ostensibly privatized media, fragmentation and bipolar (Arab nationalist/American, Saudi/Iranian, secular/Islamist) contentions in Arab politics, which have hampered the creation of consensus, and, most importantly, the fact that media – anywhere – cannot simply replace the functions of traditional political structures like parties, trade unions and social movements.

Indeed, the state's need for security and the means of coercion it uses to maintain control loom large in many of the chapters. Moreover, as Naomi Sakr writes, the slow development of a self-sustaining media market economy beyond the state has not only determined media content (favouring profitable shows like *Star Academy* with its call-in function), but also, more damagingly, necessitates state subsidies that habitually come with political control. Another weapon of control in the state's arsenal is a set of strict media laws applied strategically, and often couched in a discourse of security in the face of terrorism and Western onslaught on the Arab nation, to curb critical journalists when necessary, as shown by Orayb Aref Najjar. This line of argumentation is supplemented by Tourya Guaaybess, who bluntly concludes that the touted privatization of Arab media must be placed within the context of state capitalism, cronyism and measured liberalization.

If the continued role of the state is seen as crucial in assessing the limitations of 'new media', so are the ways in which people use media content and hence participate in the creation of new public spheres beyond strict state control. The book makes an admirable attempt to collate work on Arab audiences, which is still in its infancy but, as several people in the field (including Hafez in his introduction) are beginning to realize, needs to be developed. Hussein Amin provides a very helpful overview of research on Arab audiences, which reveals a predilection for quantitative methods, from the first studies in the 1950s to today, but otherwise lacks a unified research agenda. Amin's call for more attention to be paid to different viewer groups and their viewing habits is addressed by Marwan Kraidy, who argues that 'the Arab audience' is to some extent a socially imagined category. He cleverly deconstructs the assumptions that shape public discourse about Arab audiences both in the West and the Middle East, akin to clichés about 'the Arab street'. Furthermore, Kraidy encourages researchers to question whether TV really is the most important media form today, and to look at the ways in which national boundaries are being challenged. The increasing interaction

between media forms across boundaries should entice us to consider the impact of this new hypermedia space on social identities in the region.

This and other aspects of media use can only be appreciated through some form of content analysis. In line with their call for more empirical studies, several authors identify exactly this field as a distinct lacuna in Arab media studies and call for debate about the appropriate methodology. Katharina Nötzold's chapter on news coverage on Lebanese TV is one example of what content analysis that combines quantitative and qualitative methodologies can produce. Through rigorous scrutiny of coding categories of Lebanon's various TV channels, her documentation verifies the standard assumption that Lebanese TV channels do indeed primarily reflect the sectarian-political interests of their owners, even if there is a degree of overlap in the events they choose to cover. An example of closer readings of media content as texts (which suits entertainment better than news) can be found in Christa Salamandra's study of Syrian *musalsalat*. These popular dramatic series illustrate both a growing Islamic influence in media production, as well as hardened notions of Arab authenticity which exist across the board of Arab media, and which exacerbate defensive discourses of community, and the need to defend it from onslaught, in Arab media today.

The question is: what exactly produces the increasing sense of a chasm between East and West, most infamously and dangerously exemplified by the change in perception of al-Jazeera, from being an icon of civil society for the Western press before 2001 to being associated with terrorism and anti-Western attitudes today, as Tourya Guaaybess and others note. Kai Hafez addresses the problem by looking at objectivity in Arab and Western journalism, and whether or not we, as media consumers in two different parts of the world, share the same information on the basis of which public opinion is formed. He argues that a media ethics based on objectivity has indeed taken root, but is clouded by defensive stances as a product of ongoing cultural and political conflicts in the region and with the West. Hafez's study is augmented by Judith Pies' valuable analysis of the formation of media ethics through education of journalists in Jordan and Lebanon, which provides evidence for the existence of high ethical standards, albeit with different aims – in Lebanon to preserve national unity, and in Jordan to improve the journalistic profession.

The breadth of topics and advanced conceptual interventions in *Arab Media – Power and Weakness* easily makes it one of the best overviews of the field to date. At the same time, the book highlights the difficulties faced by researchers, which Kai Hafez himself outlines: that Arab media must necessarily be approached from many disciplinary viewpoints, that its subject matter is extremely comprehensive and often ephemeral, and that it has become so politicized that obfuscating analysis is the order of the day. The answer he suggests, and the book's ambition,

is to let Arab media studies be an interdisciplinary merger of the theories and methodologies of social science and humanities.

In the end, the book does however lean heavily towards political science and sociology. To some extent this is a strength of the book, as it allows a focused exploration of the impact of Arab media on state–society relations and its quest for useful theoretical models. Some suggest political opportunity structures, some Charles Tilly's work on contentious politics and social movements, as well as social movement theory more broadly, while several authors quite successfully apply framing theory. The articles show how these different frameworks developed in sociology, political science and media studies can help us make sense of the political effects of Arab media.

But it is also a weakness that in this overview of the field, only Salamandra's article gives a sense of the ways in which an ethnography of media can bring us closer to the lifeworlds affecting and affected by cultural production. In the same vein, there is a lack of close readings of media content informed by either literary or cultural theory. The slant can partly be explained by a predilection for news coverage, which perhaps is an effect of the politicization of Arab media that many of the contributors deprecate. Media, of course, consist of a lot more than news, and if anything this powerful intervention in Arab media studies must be faulted for downplaying the importance of entertainment, despite Hafez' admission that perhaps 'the real power of Arab media has to be located in a sphere that lies beyond the realm of realpolitik' (p. 4). It is not just that entertainment changes attitudes and hence may be conducive to democratization by affecting macro structures in the long run, as Hafez remarks (p. 5). More broadly, media form Arab subjectivities in ways that cannot and should not necessarily be measured and judged in terms of their potential political effect. If one is interested in these aspects of media, an earlier assessment, Eickelman and Anderson's *New Media in the Muslim World: The Emerging Public Sphere* (2003) is of more use.

Perhaps the tilt towards politics in the book is a symptom of a broader 'al-Jazeera effect' in the field of Arab media studies. The particular political and politicized position of al-Jazeera at the nexus of several regional struggles – for and against American interests, autocratic regimes and Saudi hegemony – has meant that Arab media studies are dominated by a specifically political optic. The 'al-Jazeera effect' in Arab media studies is not just, as Walter Armbrust (2005) has pointed out, too much focus on al-Jazeera at the expense of the variety of other media institutions making their impact these years. Equally, al-Jazeera continues to determine the kind of questions we ask about Arab media. Kai Hafez in his introduction *to Arab Media – Power and Weakness*, comments on the problem that perhaps the greatest effects of new media are not those that can be measured politically – the 'al-Jazeera effect' of democratization and free political debate normally alluded to –

but the more subtle social changes taking place over time in people's worldviews as an effect of their exposure to mass media and the way they make use of it in their daily lives. One could add that media have indeed changed people's worldview consistently since the early modern period, in the Arab Middle East and elsewhere. Nothing 'new' about media there.

Another slight weakness of an otherwise powerful book – excluding Christa Salamandra's chapter on secular and Islamist contentions in Syrian *musalsalat* and Carola Richter's piece on Islamist journalism in Egypt – is the tendency to view Arab media as a balancing power to political Islam (p. 2). Islamic and Islamist actors have considerable and increasing impact on how the new media – not least al-Jazeera – promote their visions of society and religion. Carola Richter's article presents evidence of the influence of the Islamic press influence on Egyptian mainstream media, while Salamandra shows the impact of Islamist sensitivities on Syrian producers of TV dramas. These conclusions could obviously be extended to the realm of satellite TV, where Islamic preachers and religious shows are now a mainstay of programming and hence a key feature of Arab media. Moreover, the last decade has seen the growth of specifically Islamist media like the satellite channels Iqraa, al-Risala and, to some extent, al-Manar, and Salafist outlets such as al-Rahma and al-Nas. The Islamization of Arab media is too important to be wished away and should be part of any assessment of the field.

References

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