Special section editorial

Critical Media in the Arab World

Ehab Galal & Thomas Fibiger

Author information:
Ehab Galal is an Associate Professor at the Department of Cross-Cultural and Regional Studies, Copenhagen University. He has approached research questions from a cross-disciplinary perspective inspired by media as well as ethnographic, cultural and religious studies. Since 2018, he has been leading a research team working on the project *Mediatized Diaspora*, which investigates transnational media use and contentious politics among Arab diaspora in Europe. For more information about Ehab, please follow this link: https://ccrs.ku.dk/staff/?pure=en/persons/164164 and https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9656-5038
E-mail: ehab@hum.ku.dk

Thomas Fibiger is an Associate Professor in Arab and Islamic Studies at Aarhus University. He holds a PhD in Anthropology from Aarhus University (2010), based on several rounds of ethnographic fieldwork in Bahrain, focused on religion, politics and uses of the past. More recently he has been involved in collaborative research projects on Shia Islam and on sectarianism, based on new fieldwork in Kuwait and Bahrain (2013–2017). Since 2018 he has been part of the research project Mediatized Diaspora based at Copenhagen University, working in particular with Bahrainis in London and in Denmark. His most recent publication within this project can be found in the *Journal of Arab and Muslim Media Research* 13:1 (2020). For more information: http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7855-8376
E-mail: thomas.fibiger@cas.au.dk

In all Arab countries, media have historically been subject to a greater or lesser degree of censorship, not least linked to the establishment of independent nation states, where the media have been used in the construction of a national identity and for political mobilization purposes. In this context, media scholars have regarded the new communication technology as a possible tool for change. Accordingly, the launch of transnational media, such as satellite TV and social media, have been seen as a revolutionary breach with the traditional state loyalty of Arab media (Howard & Hussain, 2013). Thus, when *Al-Jazeera* satellite channel was launched in 1996, its ideals of critical journalism and its critical debate programs initiated discussions of the transformative role of transnational Arab media (Figenschou, 2013). In particular, media scholars have been talking about the possibility of developing a new Arab civic public with space for critical debate, where media liberated from the states' censorship could function as tools for a democratization process in the Arab world (Alterman, 1998). The Arab Spring in 2011 and the subsequent years laid grounds for a continuing development of critical media, which started with satellite technology and the Internet. One development is the appearance of a new kind of opposition media produced by citizen journalists and the political opposition (Yonus, 2020). In the wake of the Arab Spring and the deep state's success in rendering the revolutionary movements impotent, many of the opposition media have been forced to operate outside their countries of origin. This is the case for the Egyptian opposition media in Istanbul, Iraqi and Bahraini in London, and Syrian in Paris and Istanbul. The other side of this development towards more critical media, however, is the continuous attempts by Arab states, though to a lesser degree Tunisia, still to control the media institutions using different methods to mobilize their populations against the 2011 revolutionary values. Many Arab regimes accuse the secular, liberal, and Islamist opposition media for promoting Muslim terrorist political organizations that support and legitimize a split between what the Arab regimes define as the current democratic Arab regimes versus non-democratic Islamist values.

Much has been written about the role of media during the Arab uprisings since 2011 (Lynch, 2014; Gerges, 2015; Zayani & Mirgani, 2016). These analyses have in particular highlighted how social media, naming this a 'Facebook revolution', carried the wave of revolutions (Bebawi & Bossio, 2014). In an opposite analytical direction, others have shown how regimes took control over the media and used them for their own purposes, including control over the political narrative and surveillance of dissent (Shehata, 2018). The articles in this section provide a broader picture of the role of critical media in the Arab world, before, during, and after the Arab Spring of 2011.

In a recent article on the media scene in and of the Arab world, Sahar Khamis and Randall Fowler (Khamis & Fowler, 2020) point to the need to broaden the analytical scope and contextualization of the role of the media in and after the Arab Spring. They suggest that scholars need to look more at the historical development of media in the Arab world, and how this has been appropriated and circumvented

by regimes in order to steer the official narrative of politics and modernization. A second argument forwarded by Khamis and Fowler is that the focus on the use of social media by political activists must be integrated with a more general analysis of 'cyber wars' and how regimes and others struggle over the dissemination of news, stories and truths. The three articles in this special issue section all seek to push this discussion forward.

The first article brings us right up to the wake of the 2011 uprisings. One media outcome of the 2011 uprising was dissent within the editorial group of the famed *Al-Jazeera* TV station. A profiled chief editor, Ghassan bin Jeddo, left *Al-Jazeera* in April 2011, protesting the way *Al-Jazeera* embraced the uprising in Syria. With a new base in Lebanon, bin Jeddo launched the channel *al-Mayadeen*, which has been considered in particular a mouthpiece for the Shia of Lebanon, Syria and the wider Middle East. From its start, *al-Mayadeen* had a very strong editorial policy opposing support for the Arab uprisings. Instead, it tried to refocus or rather redirect attention back to the Palestinian cause and criticize what it considered Western and Israeli imperialism. In her article, based on fieldwork with and at the station in its formative years, Christine Crone analyzes how a variety of 'enemies' were constructed by *al-Mayadeen* in its early and founding phase to support this editorial line: These enemies range from Israel to the militant Islamic State group, and more generally to the Sunni Arab world at large, one which otherwise dominates both media and politics in the Arab world.

The second article in this section provides a historical perspective, which shows how the limited access to state media made religious groups adopt print media as the method for reaching their audiences. In her paper, Kiki Santing sheds light on such religious print media. During the regime of the Egyptian President Gamal Abd al-Nasser (1954–1970), the political opposition and especially the religious opposition were oppressed. Under President Anwar al-Sadat (1970–81), political life was liberalized to some degree, which gave room for Islamic opinions and media. Consequently, the *Muslim Brotherhood* got the chance to reprint their journal *al-Da'wa* (The Call), which they previously had published in a period from 1951 to 1954. During the presidency of Sadat it was published from 1976 to 1981, but had to use six years to regain permission to publish under President Mubarak leading to the relaunch in 1987 under a new name: *Liwa' al-Islam* (The Banner of Islam). Santing contextualizes the contemporary debates on political legitimacy and the use of Islam therein through a historical case study of two seemingly different media outlets: the governmental newspaper *al-Liwa' al-Islami* (The Islamic Banner) and the *Muslim Brotherhood* journal *Liwa' al-Islam* at the time of the 1987 parliamentary elections. Comparing two Islamic journals published by rather different organizations, Santing argues, this binary shows how the framework of Islam can be used in different ways by two opposing political agendas, and how this formed an important clash of media in the 1980's, more specifically around the parliamentary election in Egypt 1987.

The third article in this special issue section deals more directly with the media repercussions of the uprisings and its aftermath, and with social media, but it does so by focusing on the art scene of Egypt and how artists have created online archives to document, share and portray the uprising and its manifold social media expression. The author, Maj Ørskov, takes the art collective *Mosireen* as example and in particular the web archive *858.ma*, showing how such projects are sites of memory but also sites for potential political action, renewed reflection and agency. Even if press and news media are extremely restricted in Egypt, and more so in recent years, civil society initiatives including art projects such as *858.ma* still work to document, save and reflect on the events since 2011 that have shaped and continues to shape politics and society not only in Egypt but in the wider Middle East. Thus, despite increasing pressure by the Egyptian authorities to regulate also these new media, the usage of new media appearances indeed have a potential for creating change.

Taken together the three articles therefore bring new analytical perspectives to the fore, highlighting the diversity of critical media in the Arab world, and how this can not only be understood as a question of regime control and surveillance as against the widespread dissemination from below through a variety of social media. Rather, the analysis of critical media in the Arab world must be seen in a longer historical perspective than one starting only in 2011, and at the same time it must be acknowledged how the events in 2011 and after had wider implications for the media scene, including, as in the articles here, the launching of new TV-channels as well as an intellectual, art-oriented reflection on the events and their mediation.

Acknowledgements

References

Alterman, Jon (1998). *New Media, New Politics? From Satellite Television to the Internet in the Arab World*. Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

Bebawi, Saba and Bossio, Diana (eds.) (2014). *Social Media and the Politics of Reportage The 'Arab Spring'*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Figenschou, Tine Ustad (2013). *Al Jazeera and the Global Media Landscape: The South is Talking Back*. Routledge.

Gerges, Fawaz A. (ed.) (2015). *Contentious Politics in the Middle East: Popular Resistance and Marginalized Activism beyond the Arab Uprisings*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Howard, Philip N. and Hussain, Muzammil M. (eds.) (2013). *Democracy's Fourth Wave?: Digital Media and the Arab Spring*. Oxford University Press.

Khamis, Sahar and Fowler, Randall (2020). Arab resistance in the diaspora: Comparing the Saudi dissident and the Egyptian whistleblower. *Journal of Arab & Muslim Media Research, 13*(1).

Lynch, Marc (2014). *The Arab Uprisings Explained: New Contentious Politics in the Middle East*. Columbia University Press.

Shehata, Mostafa (2018). *Newspapers and social network sites in Egypt after the 2011 revolution: connective action, communication power and mediatization of politics*. Roskilde University.

Yonus, Zenia (2020). Ambiguous belonging: Media practices among Syrians in Denmark. *Journal of Arab & Muslim Media Research, 13*(1)

Zayani, Mohamed and Mirgani Suzi (ed.) (2016). *Bullets and Bulletins: Media and Politics in the Wake of the Arab Uprisings*. C Hurst & Co.