

4-1-2011

Mahjoob Zweiri and Emma C. Murphy (eds.). *The New Arab Media: Technology, Image and Perception*. Ithaca Press. 2010.

Timothy James Wilkerson Ph.D.
Northwestern University, t-wilkerson@northwestern.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs>



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#), [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#), [Environmental Studies Commons](#), and the [Sociology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Wilkerson, Timothy James Ph.D. (2011) "Mahjoob Zweiri and Emma C. Murphy (eds.). *The New Arab Media: Technology, Image and Perception*. Ithaca Press. 2010.," *Journal of International and Global Studies*: Vol. 2 : No. 2 , Article 15.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs/vol2/iss2/15>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Digital Commons@Lindenwood University. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of International and Global Studies* by an authorized editor of Digital Commons@Lindenwood University. For more information, please contact phuffman@lindenwood.edu.

Mahjoob Zweiri and Emma C. Murphy (eds.). *The New Arab Media: Technology, Image and Perception*. Ithaca Press. 2010.

For millennia and across various treaties on statecraft and warfare such as the Indian Arthashastra and the Chinese Art of War, it has been recognized that whoever controls information, controls their environment, militarily, economically, and most importantly politically. In this post-Mubarak era, we have seen very dramatically how old, as well as recently emerging ICTs have come to provide the tipping point of social and political change in the Arab world. The subject (revolutionary change) is being created in a very realistic sense and in a hyper-Foucaultian way by the mere discourse about the subject. As blogs, Tweets, and Facebook pages go viral on across the web, Arab leaders such as Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh and Momar Gadhafi call the spread of civil disobedience communications a “virus” in the more pejorative sense of something that the general public must be quarantined from and inoculated against. Yet the discourse about change is itself creating the change by allowing virtual public spheres to create an imagined space free of fear, and free of the imposed limitations of decades (if not generations) of accumulated old guard leadership.

In the context of this communications tsunami and the corresponding political change that is emerging in the Arab near-east, the Ithaca Press book entitled The Arab New Media: Technology, Image, and Perception is a timely and important book. It covers adeptly all of the major aspects of Arab media to include old technologies such as state owned broadcast radio and television channels, as well as new and emerging avenues of communication such as privately owned radio stations, satellite channels, and the all ubiquitous world wide web.

In the first article of the book, by Ahmet Uysal, the editorial content of the Al Jazeera International (English) channel is compared and contrasted with that of the Al Jazeera Arabic broadcast and each is compared to its corresponding on-line version. In a sample study, Dr. Uysal found that while both the English and the Arabic television broadcasts both tended to focus more on civil strife and conflict than their respective on-line counterparts, the televised English version of Al Jazeera differed from Al Jazeera in Arabic in some significant ways. The Arabic channel tended to focus more on Muslim concerns and Arab regional politics than the English transmission, which tended to focus on more broadly international themes (from lands further east of Doha to include the Indian subcontinent, the far-East, and even South America.) Also, the language used tended to be very different on the two broadcasts: while the Arabic broadcast tended to label bombers in Palestine and Iraq as “shaheed” or “martyrs”, the English version tended to use the term “suicide bombers”.

As Dr. Uysal indicates himself, neither of these findings concerning editorial styles and content is particularly surprising given the cultural and religious difference in the target audiences of the two channels. The differences in content also reflect the natural differences in inclinations, backgrounds, and educations of the reporters and editorial staff of the two different language broadcasts. Yet, this apparent diglossia of voices coming from what is essentially the same news organization does tend to beg the question of how committed Al Jazeera is as a whole organization with providing its various audiences with material which avoids sensationalizing, muckraking, and religion-

bating. Although this question falls somewhat outside the purview of Dr. Uysal's study, it is perhaps an important question which arises from his findings, which he does not address.

In the second chapter of The New Arab Media, the book moves from the discussion of new private satellite channels in the region to that of the history of Internet adoption in the Arab world. In this chapter, author Jon Anderson discusses the historical progression of Internet adoption in the Arab world from being a series of public sector projects, to that of individual engineers seeking to make more daring forays into the on-line world, to the eventual creation of new institutions that are either solely private or are hybrids of public and private sector. Anderson's discussion is informative, especially for the uninitiated in the subject. However Anderson's discussion stays away from how the adoption of the Internet has created a place of political contest (or if it has created such a space). Instead he seems to assert that although the democratizing value of the Internet is a natural and perhaps more sexy topic, that the "mundane" history of Internet adoption by these countries is just as important. But with a title such as "Between Freedom and Coercion", one rather expects to have a bit more discussion on the co-opting of the Internet by alternative voices in these countries, even if the adoption of the new technologies was in itself important and in large measure carried out by moderate leaders as a modernizing enterprise.

In chapter three Andreas Musolff and Abdel-mutaleb al Zuweiri discuss the use of linguistic metaphors in the manufacturing of consent, which has enabled the US-led war in Iraq to continue unabated for years. The two authors examine how the continued use of the "Milestone" metaphor used by various television satellite channels such as CNN and Al Jazeera either in a positive sense, a negative sense, or in an ambiguous sense, helped to create a mental image that suggests some type of teleological progression of action in Iraq—that somehow there was a plan, a road, a way that was being followed with clearly defined landmarks on a way to a clearly defined goal. If the over-all theme of this book is to discuss the use or misuse of media in allowing the people of the Arab world to overcome Western and their own internal autocratic hegemony, then this chapter is one of the most clear in its counter-hegemony. It not only shows how corporate owned media outlets in the US used the "milestone" metaphor to rationalize the protracted war in Iraq and thus support the military-industrial-corporate complex of which it is a part, but also how an Arab media outlet such as Al Jazeera is often complicit in using the same language in its discourse. Metaphor, the authors conclude, is a necessary component of cognition, but we must scrutinize the metaphors we use in order to determine whether they are present to buttress an all-pervasive hegemony.

Equally strong in its counter-hegemony force is the next article of the book by Saima Saeed. In this chapter, Ms. Saeed examines how modern warfare is supported by four distinct uses of media as an instrument: that of propaganda, news management, information warfare, and finally public diplomacy. Although public diplomacy and news management seem fairly innocuous compared to the use of propaganda and information warfare, the author discusses how each is used to manufacture consent through the control and manipulation of communications. Although there is nothing necessarily new in the discussion for those who are familiar with the work of Chomsky, Gramsci, and Raymond Williams, this chapter is a very good application of their notions to Western hegemony over the Arab world (especially in support of Western aggression against the Arab world, such as the invasion of Iraq).

In the next chapter, Khalid Hajji takes the reader into a more philosophical realm than the other articles that precede it (or for that matter any of the articles which follow it.) In the article he speculates that since the time of the Renaissance, visual culture has garnered more and more currency with regard to our attempts to understand the world—particularly after the invention of the camera. He posits, however, that visual culture (although allowing us to rather forensically dissect the world into components), has not allowed us to ascribe any more meaning to our knowledge than in pre-visual culture times. In fact, in many ways, he asserts images are totally devoid of meaning. While at the same time they try to confine “truth” or “reality” to what can be seen, images are in fact not a reflection of reality, but merely constructs made in the process of inclusion and exclusion.

Although Khalid Hajji’s article is one of the most interesting and thought provoking in the book, he does not seem to tie it back well to the over-all theme of the book—that of Arab media. All of what he discusses is, of course germane to a discussion of Arab media as it is to a discussion of any national or regional media. But a brief inclusion of how his thoughts were particularly important to the discourse on *Arab* media might help to bind it better to the book as a whole.

Fiona McCallum’s next chapter again discusses the adoption and use of the Internet and satellite television by those in the Arab region. However, unlike the previous article by Jon Anderson concerning the internet, McCallum demonstrates how the web is a site of political contest—in this case how diaspora Coptic Christians are using the internet to bring attention to the plight of their community in Egypt. McCallum further notes how this effort to bring focus to the situation of this religious minority has created a backlash from the Egyptian Muslim community, which has ironically caused the deterioration of the Coptic position.

One minor point of critique about this chapter is that although McCallum talks about the Coptic diaspora groups who have web sites, she does not in fact name the web sites specifically in the body of her text. While she does so in her end notes, it might be nice if she were to speak directly about the web sites as platforms in the same manner as she names and speaks about the Al-Hayat satellite channel. By not doing so, the author seems to unintentionally provide us a hierarchy in which satellite television is worthy of being named directly, while web based platforms are reduced to being merely the on-line newsletters of diaspora groups.

The next chapter provides the reader with an over-view of the potential of Arab ICTs to provide “public spheres” in the Habermasian sense of the word—i.e. a space of free and open debate where ideas can be aired and contested. Emma Murphy wrote this article before the eruption of revolution in Tunisia, Egypt and other Arab regimes, and her “verdict is still out” approach as to whether ICTs can provide such a space for the middle class in the various countries of the Arab world now seems a bit dated only a few months after its publication.

Fares Braizat and David Berger’s article discussing the impact of satellite television on public opinion in the Arab world seems to be sound both quantitatively and qualitatively. Their surveys on viewership of three different satellite news channels demonstrates not only the long understood concept that viewers tend to watch channels that conform to their already held beliefs, but also elucidates for the reader how broadly Al Jazeera editorial content is perceived by an Arab audience. Some audience members

who view Al Jazeera for local news see the channel as supporting Muslim causes including adoption of a sharia-based system. Those members of the Jordanian viewership who watch Al Jazeera for international news, however, tend to perceive Al Jazeera's editorial content as being mainly supportive of multi-party democracy. This seemingly contradictory reading of Al Jazeera content is perhaps not surprising when considering that the network has alternately been dubbed "pro-Zionist" and "jihadist" in its orientation because of the multiplicity of voices it broadcasts.

The last article of the book approaches the subject of Arab private radio stations in Jordan and their impact in creating public spheres, and spaces of contestation. As the authors mention, in many previous studies about media in the Arab world, radio has been given rather short shrift. But given how dismal the audience share of independent news radio Amman Net in Jordan (with only .7 percent of the radio audience), one wonders if radio as a medium will have the "revolutionary" impact the title of the article seems to indicate. If even serious *televised* alternative journalism of the stripe of "Democracy Now" in the U.S. has a very small audience share, it is hard to see how news radio programming can reach an audience in an Arabic market where youth culture primarily uses radio as a source for pop music.

Altogether, Ithaca Press's new book treats all players in the realm of Arabic regional ICTs with due service—from older forms of mass media such as state owned and sponsored radio and television channels, to new and emerging sites of contestation such as the world wide web, and independent satellite channels and private radio stations. It is a valuable and broad-ranging introduction to Arab media and its impact on the audiences of the region in terms of their attitudes and abilities to contest the internal and external hegemonies with which all ordinary people around the world must contend.

Timothy James Wilkerson, PhD
Northwestern University
t-wilkerson@northwestern.edu