

# New Media Geographies and the Middle East

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## Abstract

This special issue of *Television & New Media* brings together current research on media technologies, society, and culture in the Middle East from diverse methodological and analytical perspectives. The topics addressed cover a wide spectrum: circulation of Arab music videos and public discourse; Lebanese bloggers and mediated public spheres; transnational television audiences and ontological security; social media, TV talk shows, and political change in Egypt; youth-generated Arab media and cultural politics; and the Arab Spring as an ephemeral communicative space. Together, the articles provide a panorama of how today's multimodal media geographies and engaged actors reinscribe public cultures and politics in the Middle East.

## Keywords

television, media geography, online social media, Arab Spring, communicative space, popular communication

Due to strategic interests, the the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) was the focus of media attention in the United States and Europe long before the so-called “Arab Spring” brought the entire region into the global limelight. In the years preceding online and mobile technologies, considerable space in media studies—from film to international press—was dedicated to exploring representation, culture, and political communication in relation to the MENA region. The rise of mediated networks and individual communication technologies over the past decade prompted a marked interest in the digital and the online, with the offline often neglected or insufficiently analyzed. The use of mobile applications, blogs, and online social media during the 2009 postelection protests in Iran and

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during the Arab Spring, which, as I discuss shortly, turned into an elongated *meta-event*, provided the ready-made impetus for a rhetoric of techno-change to flourish. Such accounts were quickly countered by various critical and materialist approaches pointing to longitudinal dimensions beyond (yet alongside) media saturation. The primary factors that eventually triggered the events were undoubtedly economic destitution, unemployment (often leading to tragic journeys of search for hope in Europe), suppression of dissent, and an overall public fatigue with decades of oppression, coupled with the pervasive use of the media ensemble as channels to express affect, to communicate, and to network.

The intellectual tools and approaches required to grasp the complexity of these recent reformations went beyond traditional theories of democracy and public deliberation. The ways in which expressive agency (Hetherington, 1997) and dissent were articulated through *actual* and *virtual* means (Morley, 2011), through sound, image, and body, all became part of both new and sustained research agendas. In its aftermath, the Arab Spring has opened up a unique discursive space of intense debates through global popular communication networks. The opening of such a space can be attributed to the coexistence of a number of key factors. First, despite the distinctive national character of each mass protest and regime ousting (in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen), on the whole, the events had both a regional character and a high level of global-transnational significance due to the long-standing geopolitics of the region. Second, the frame of enraged peoples eager to topple oppressive regimes had strong parallels with those of protest movements and mass demonstrations of the postglobal order (especially at a time of multiple financial crises and highly contested corporate bailouts). The Arab Spring has struck a chord with certain factions of the global community harboring honed empathy toward people-powered regime change and reclamation of agency.

Finally, in conjunction with these factors, the existence of a techno-savvy young population organizing and connecting both translocally and globally through transmedia routes came to re-highlight the significance of technological progress. They, however, often became the sole point of focus in media stories and popular discourse. Combined, such dimensions gave the Arab Spring a character of a *meta-event* whose significance and discursive scope well exceeds the time-space specific components that constitute it (as well as the question of whether it will lead to democratic social change). It was beyond religious or secular, left or right politics, and its consequences, on a global scale, are irreversible regardless of the direction of due change.

In sum, two further conceptual features are to be foregrounded here. First, the immediate and expanding communicative spaces such meta-events open up accommodate a high level of political/discursive diversity and *topical multiplicity* stretching over a considerable length of time. Second, the dynamic and generative dialectic between their local/regional rootedness and global relevance make them irreducible to a social phenomenon, hence *transcendent* on a scalar level. Public discourses and acts that surround such meta-events and their broader components, many of which precede the events or are indirectly related to them, necessitate focused analyses that underscore

both material and symbolic dimensions in specific contexts. This has been the express purpose of the current special issue. The articles offer close analyses of various events, moments, and phenomena (before, during, or after the uprisings), thus providing contextualized understandings of the uses and appropriation of the media in different places.

In *Contention and Circulation in the Digital Middle East: Music Video As Catalyst*, Marwan Kraidy explores the significance and power of music videos in instigating public discourse and political engagement through *hypermedia space*. In the next article, Kristina Riegert and her coauthor probe into the Arab blogosphere and interrogate the extent to which blogging stretches the boundaries of the public sphere and whether Lebanese blogs constitute a counter-public space. Drawing upon Giddens and Silverstone, Myria Georgiou redirects our attention to the sustained significance of television, which, she argues, is largely absent from discourses on the Arab Spring, in fostering ontological security among diasporic Arab audiences. In a similar vein, in social media, television talk shows, and political change in Egypt, Naomi Sakr traces the processes behind the rise of oppositional talk on Egyptian television and discusses how censorship of mass media in Egypt pushed political communication to online venues. Returning to online platforms, Joe F. Khalil examines youth-generated media such as *BlogggingBeirut.com* as an alternative form of communication. In the final article by Miyase Christensen and her coauthor, reader comments on newspapers articles about the Arab Spring are reflected upon as ephemeral communicative spaces.

The various aspects explored in this themed issue encompass a wide range of critical social and cultural theory. Overall, these accounts by prominent international researchers provide a panorama of change and continuity in the Middle East and the intertwined social, cultural, and technological assemblages that reshape life and politics in the region.

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### **Author's Note**

Most of the articles of this themed issue are related with earlier work presented at two panels organized by Kristina Riegert (2011 IAMCR and 2012 ECREA) on the topic of digital life in the Middle East.

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