Mass Media in the Middle East

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Introductory readings.


Week 1: Orality and Literacy


51; chapter 6 on Arabic influence in Continental word separation, pp. 120-130).

Question: “Writing (and especially alphabetic writing) is a technology, calling for the use of tools and other equipment … It initiated what print and computers only continue, the reduction of dynamic sound to quiescent space, the separation of the word from the living present, where alone spoken words can exist” (Walter Ong, Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word, Routledge 1982, pp. 81-82).

In what sense was pre-print Arabic writing “technologized”? In the context of Arabic pre-print writing, are there potential objections to Ong’s way of understanding the implications of writing?

Week 2: Orality, Textuality, and Social Transformation in the Middle East (read two out of three from Messick, Shryock, and Mitchell).

Reading:


**Question:** "The absolute opposition between the order of the modern West and the backwardness and disorder of the East was not only found in Europe, but began to repeat itself in Egyptian scholarship and popular literature, just as it was replicated in colonial cities. Through its textbooks, school teachers, universities, newspapers, novels and magazines, the colonial order was able to penetrate and colonise local discourse." (Timothy Mitchell, Colonising Egypt, p. 171)

Compare and contrast Mitchell’s arguments about the processes of institutionalizing European discourse with those of Brinkley Messick (The Calligraphic State) and/or Andrew Shryock (Nationalism and the Genealogical Imagination). In particular, how does European "order" affect practices of writing?

**Week 3: The Press and Publishing.**

**Reading:**


**Question:** It has been claimed that the printing press encountered significant cultural resistance in the Middle East. It is also assumed that when printing was adapted in this region it caused far-reaching social change. Discuss the advent of printing in the Arab Middle East. Was there in fact resistance to printing, and if so, why? And what was the nature of the social change precipitated by the printing press once it came into widespread use in the Middle East?

**Week 4: The Age(s) of Media: Text, Image, Sound**


**Collateral Reading:** Arasoughly, Alia ed., Screens of Life: Critical Film Writing from the Arab World, v. 1. Quebec: World Heritage Press.


Question: According to Ronald Deibert, in the emerging communications environment of hypermedia,

no single technological innovation or instrument of technology signals this transformation. Rather, the emergence of the hypermedia environment reflects a complex melding and converging of distinct technologies into a single integrated web of digital-electronic-telecommunications—a process that has roots reaching back to the late nineteenth century, and that encompasses a series of technological innovations that continued through the twentieth century, culminating in the digital convergence that began in the late 1960s” (Parchment, Printing, and Hypermedia, p. 114, my emphasis in bold face).

Of course the Middle East of 1900-1970 was at least as distant as Europe and the US from the integrated “web-like” communications Deibert describes. Discuss the Middle East in terms of the “proto-hypermedia” era that Deibert posits for Europe. Can there be a “proto-hypermedia” history of the Middle East?

Question: “[W]hile technical innovation comes in ‘waves’ … associated with economic trends, historical labels tend to be attached to societies according to what seems, for a variety of reasons, to be their dominant communications technology. The ‘age of railways’ … ‘age of broadcasting’ or ‘the age of television’, and ‘age of the cinema … have overlapped. … In none of the ages … did one medium eliminate another. … Yet as technological advance speeded up (with occasional lags), old technologies were being challenged and, above all, their institutional framework was having to be thought out afresh” (Briggs and Burke, A Social History of Media, pp. 213-214).

Can one think in terms of “media ages” in the Middle East? If so, what sort of overlaps and re-thinkings were occurring?

NOTE: These essays require thinking “outside the box” of the existing literature on the Middle East. They are, consequently, not for the faint of heart. The literature on Middle Eastern media tends to discuss print to some extent; and “new media” in the conventional post-digital sense; but doesn’t yet enable a history of new media that accounts for social changes between the advent of printing and the advent of digital media. Such a history would focus on the effect of such phenomena as sound recording, radio, illustrated magazines, cinema, and even terrestrial television. Your essay therefore must assume a partly speculative stance with regard to gaps in the literature.

Week 5: Authenticity and the Formation of Canons: Umm Kulthum and Abd al-Wahhab

near-east)


Music:

CDs and cassette tapes of Umm Kulthum, Abd al-Wahhab, and many others are widely available.

Films:
Al-Warda al-Bayda (The White rose). Muhammad Karim, 1933. (subtitles)
Salama (Salama). Togo Mizrahi, 1945. (subtitles)
Yaum Sa'id (Happy day). Muhammad Karim, 1940.


Question: Are tarab and mass mediation mutually exclusive?

Question: Umm Kulthum, Abd al-Wahhab and others have had the mantle of high culture bestowed upon them. Their work, then, should by definition be considered distinct from mere popular culture. Agree or disagree?

Week 6: The Problem of Dance

Reading:


Websites: Snake Skin: http://www.snakeskin.com/NajCont.htm
Gilded Serpent: http://www.gildedserpent.com/
Aleena's Photos: http://www.aleena.com/gallery/
Many others only a mouse click away from your desk top.

**Films:**
- Asmar wa-Gamil, Abbas Kamil, 1950.
- Shari' Muhammad Ali, Niyazi Mustafa, 1944.
- Tamar Hinna, Husayn Fayzi, 1957.

**Collateral Reading:** Arabesque (U.S. oriental dance periodical, 1975-1995).


**Question:** How Orientalist is Oriental dance in the Orient? Discuss the cultural dynamics of Oriental dance in contemporary Egypt and beyond.

**Week 7: Small Media**

**Reading:**


Question: What are the possible political effects of "small media" (audio cassettes, but potentially also fax machines, photocopiers, the telephone) for both Middle Eastern politics and culture?

Week 8: Television and National Culture


Diase, Martha. 1996. Egyptian Television Serials, Audiences, and The Family House, A Public Health Enter-Educate Serial. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Texas, Austin. (choose this or Seymour)


Question: The “hypodermic needle” model (sometimes called the “magic bullet” perspective) is a communications theory stating that an intended media message is directly received and wholly accepted by the receiver. Before the advent of satellite television broadcasting in the Arab world musalsals (dramatic serials) were broadcast exclusively on state-owned and operated television networks. Can we assume that state agendas (social, political, economic for example) were “directly received and wholly accepted” by Arab publics?

Week 9: Television, Consumption, and Transnationalism
Arab Media and Society (formerly Transnational Broadcasting Studies <http://www.arabmediasociety.org/> (on-line journal focusing on media in the Arab world).

Kraidy, Marwan and Patrick Murphy eds. 2003. Global Media Studies:


See Week 12 for collateral Reading on Ramadan, Christmas, and Consumption

**Question:** Mass media theorists such as Horkheimer and Adorno have argued that television should be a powerful and dangerous force for social and political homogenisation. Agree or disagree? Frame your argument in the context of the available literature on Arabic-language television production, and collateral reading if necessary (e.g. on Ramadan, the notion of a "culture industry" proposed by Adorno and Horkheimer, debates over transnationalism).

Has globalization disrupted the nationalist agendas that had been prominent in Arab television during the era of terrestrial television broadcasting? Discuss with reference to satellite television broadcasting from the 1990s to the present.

**Week 10: The Polemics of News (TBA)**

**Reading:**


**Collateral Reading:** Ajami, Fouad. 2002. "What the Muslim World is Watching." *Transnational Broadcasting Studies* 8(2) available at [http://www.tbsjournal.com/Archives/Spring02/ajami.html](http://www.tbsjournal.com/Archives/Spring02/ajami.html)


*Political Communication* v. 19, no. 2 (special issue on Middle Eastern media).


*Transnational Broadcasting Studies:* " Al-Jazeera: Global Player in a Global Crisis (special issue on Al-Jazeera, no. 7); [http://www.tbsjournal.com/Archives/Fall01/fall01.html](http://www.tbsjournal.com/Archives/Fall01/fall01.html)


**Question:** The logic typically applied to al-Jazeera is to ask whether it is "friend or foe."
Friend or foe of what (or whom)? Discuss both the network and the polarized debate that structures public perceptions of it. Could there be alternative ways to approach Al-Jazeera?

**Week 11: Information Technology and New Media**

*Reading:*
- Eickelman, Dale and Jon Anderson eds. 1999. *New Media in the Muslim World*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. (chapters 1-5)


Has globalization effected such a neat shift from "two-dimensional" to "three dimensional" space in the Middle East? Respond with reference to mass media.

Question: In 1993 Howard Rheingold, a leading exponent of the democratising potential of the internet, argued that "virtual communities could help citizens revitalise democracy, or they
could be luring us into an attractively packaged substitute for democratic discourse" (Rheingold, 1993: 276). Evaluate Rheingold's argument with respect to the Middle East, both in terms of the ten years that have elapsed since he made the above claim, and in the longer history of mass media in the region.

Week 12: Christmasizing Ramadan

Ramadan websites: google the terms "Ramadan television," "Ramadan card," "Ramadan festival," and whatever other terms seem promising to you.

Collateral Reading on Ramadan, Religion and Media, Christmas, and Consumption:
Meyer, Birgit and Annelies Moors eds. 2006. Religion, Media, and the
Public Sphere. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Question: The prescribed [Ramadan] fast … make[s] people realize the hardships which others endure for lack of sustenance for their life. Only those who themselves undergo the hardship of hunger and thirst can understand the miseries of those who, in spite of labor, are not able even to meet their basic needs. This naturally induces people to help others in need and to abstain from hoarding wealth … (Ali, Syed Anwer. 1995. "Setting the Goal of the Prescribed Fast." In Laleh Bakhtiar ed., Ramadan: Motivating Believers to Action: An Interfaith Perspective. Chicago: The Institute for Traditional Psychoethics and Guidance, pp. 4-10), p. 7.

Presumably this means that in Egypt, which is well-known as an important site for Islamic revival, Ramadn is an austere affair. Discuss.