Emancipation has arguably been the main trajectory of the Arab Spring movement that rocked the Arab countries five years ago. Its aftershocks have produced a watershed in the existing scholarship on media studies and political activism, which have focused extensively on Orientalist, post-colonial, and developmental paradigms when covering the Arab World.

Despite such emancipatory dreams (and activists’ hopes), Amnesty International (2016) has recently documented that freedom of expression, social justice, and the right to communicate did not change dramatically in the Arab countries following the Arab Spring. Instead, sadly, advocates for sociopolitical change and human rights and media activists remain behind bars, persecuted, tortured, or suppressed by authoritarian regimes responsible for censorship, conflict, civil war, and a mass refugee crisis.

In Media Evolution on the Eve of the Arab Spring, Hudson, Iskandar, and Kirk have cleverly crafted a collection whose fifteen chapters document the effects of the Arab revolutions on communication patterns in four different threads: 1) social change and political culture; 2) new genres and literacies; 3) global effects; and 4) evolution of media theories. The book exhibits the complexity of debates on Arab media. The first chapter explores the notion of civil engagement in terms of the Habermasian public sphere and an argument for a “mediated civil sphere” (Zayani, p. 25), especially given the lack of participatory democracy in the majority of Arab states.

One would have hoped to see more integration of the book’s theme into Chapter 2, which presents a rather microscopic analysis on the use of media. The chapter merely gives an overview of a qualitative study on the use of media and public awareness among 30 respondents in only one rural Egyptian village (1999–2009). If the author’s thesis is to show the “gap between the people’s agenda and the government’s agenda” (Khamis, p. 44), then a larger scale of analysis (ideally among other rural villages) is needed to verify the results and draw comparisons. The same critique applies to Chapter 12, which employs Appadurai to analyze the Arab diasporic consumption of media in Europe, even though the author’s case study focused only on Germany. Other scholarly interpretations have produced a more sound approach to studying the impact of online media on the public—Benski, Langman, Perugorria, and Tejerina (2013), for example, offered a way to articulate the use of the internet and online social media to create fluid communication and to mobilize long-lasting interactions and social movements. In contrast, Chapters 3 and 4 persuasively articulate two of the most evident observations about the Arab spring: the Arabic blogosphere and cyberactivism. Etling, Kelly, Faris, and Palfrey refute the common assumption that the internet is a platform of radicalization in the Arab world; on the contrary, they pinpoint that it is a vehicle of minority expression and that it “breaks gatekeeper monopolies, and lowers barriers to political
mobilization” (p. 51). Equally, Radsch presents the key moments that shaped the Muslim Brotherhood (Ikhwan) blogosphere, skillfully dissecting the roles of identity, anonymity, participation, and gender as defined by their virtual communication.

Part two of the collection successfully maps a group of cultural genres produced in and around the Arab Spring, which arguably enabled the audience to criticize the status quo, broke taboos, and created reform that might have helped the audience dare go to the streets. It provides several examples, such as the consumption of the Turkish soap operas, the production of reality shows, and the development of Arabizi, a new language that blends both the Arabic and Roman alphabets together. Readers might have hoped for the inclusion of some of the literature on the use of art and aesthetics forms during and after the Arab Spring. Shilton (2013) argues that art in Tunisia is a way to “represent the unrepresentable” (p. 131). Similarly, Hamed and El-Bassiouny (2013) analyze graffiti specifically as a form of artistic symbolic expression, comparing it to the Berlin Wall.

Drawing on their interest and expertise in media studies and research, the authors of part three take an eloquent stance in articulating the global effects of the Arab Spring. Sreberny, a prominent scholar in international communication, provides an overview of the BBC’s version of public diplomacy during the Arabic Spring, whereby it took a new “global conversation” approach, inviting the audience to contribute their views and opinions. Similarly, El-Nawawy and Powers successfully present a case study of Al-Jazeera English as a “conciliatory medium” in trying to be “the voice of the voiceless” and breaking new ground in journalistic techniques (p. 197). Seib adds a novel dimension in discussing mainstream and alternative media, arguing that “it is incorrect to label the Arab Spring as ‘the Facebook revolution’ or ‘the Twitter revolution’, because the spectacular changes in the region were the product of courageous people, not technology” (p. 182).

The last part of the book tackles the broader question of the collection: the evolution of Arab media theories. Mellor discusses Arab journalism as an “interpretive community” (p. 223), calling for a revision of journalism curriculum, reviewing journalistic practices, and re-examining the new trends of citizen journalism during and following the Arab uprisings. Haifez adds another critique of the existing Arab media studies, viewing it as simply an application of Western theories within the Arab world. Such an interpretation is false, and rather “superficial,” according to the author (p. 248).

For me, the most significant contribution of this book is its attempt to produce a counterargument and research articulation of the Western interpretation of the Arab spring and its corresponding literature. In the concluding chapter, Iskandar underscores that his objective is a “reflexive” attempt to “problematiz[e] the process of classification, interrogat[e] definitional labels for ‘Arab media,’ [highlight] the multi-sited nature of the literature, and describ[e] additional approaches to evaluate and describe ‘Arab’ and ‘Arabic’ media” (p. 263).

Finally, the passionate desire to frame the Arabic scholarship on Arab media is quite evident in this collection. The editors have produced an interesting, complex, and rich snapshot of the Arab Spring that might serve as a reference for Arab media studies.
References

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