Emerging Digital Transitions in the Arab World: Implications for the Region's Communication Studies

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THROUGHOUT ITS EIGHTY-YEAR history, communication studies in the Arab World has generally been shaped by a convergence of national political agendas, cultural concerns, technological transitions, and Western-centered perspectives on modernization, dependency, globalization and empowerment. During the first three decades of post-colonial independence, the region's media education programs, scholarship, and professional orientations were hugely informed by both modernization and dependency perspectives, while the globalization perspective was widely popular in the 1990s, coinciding with the end of the Cold War and the advent of transnational satellite television. The empowerment perspective, on the other hand, was gaining momentum only at the dawn of the 21st Century, as the Arab World came to gradually embrace digital and online communications at institutional and personal levels. While the region's governments and business sectors saw a huge potential in digital/online communications as key forces of political stability and economic prosperity, the region's communities at large seemed to view them as enablers of greater democratization and grassroots political engagement. Across the region in general and in the Arabian Gulf countries in particular, huge investments have been channeled into building world-class digital communications infrastructures, allowing greater citizen access to an emerging virtual public sphere. At universities and research communities, this "digital phase" has been marked by new pedagogical, conceptual, and methodological shifts in media education programs; new research activities; and new professional orientations towards

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¹ Mohammad Ayish, "Arab Television Goes Commercial: A Case Study of the Middle East Broadcasting Centre," *Gazette* 59, no. 6 (1997): 473. cyber-communications and virtual engagements. I argue here that while digital transitions will continue to define the Arab World's political, cultural, and economic living experiences for many years to come, they are bound to have significant implications for media studies in the region.

Communication Studies and its Engagement with Modernization, Dependency and Globalization: A Historical Overview

Although the American University in Cairo was the first institution of higher education in the Arab World to host a journalism program in 1935, the distinctive features of media education and scholarship in the region did not take shape until the onset of the post-colonial era in which newly-independent Arab states saw mass media as key engines of socio-economic transformation and political integration. For these new governments, mass communication channels, especially radio, were instrumental in communicating "developmental" messages to mostly-illiterate national populations in line with Lerner's modernization framework of national development.² Around that concept, the region's media education and scholarship were harnessed to prepare new generations of professional communicators and researchers who strongly believed in the power of media to bring about positive socio-economic and cultural changes within their under-developed communities. In the 1960s and 1970s, universities in countries such as Egypt, Tunisia, Jordan, and Morocco became home to journalism and mass communication programs and to what came to be known as "developmental communication" research traditions.

In the meantime, communication studies in some Arab countries aligned with the former Soviet bloc—such as Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Algeria—promoted a more critical media outlook typical of the dependency perspective. Media education programs and scholarship in those countries focused on topics such as propaganda, media imperialism, and Western information hegemony. This communication studies tradition was hugely sustained by UNESCO discussions of a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) that addressed one-way information flows from the North (Western nations) to the South (Third World nations). It promoted a view of media as guardians of national identity and tools of political mobilization and national integration. Egyptian scholar Awatef Abdul Rahman of Cairo University has argued that international media channels were used to undermine pan-Arabism as a political ideology in the region.³

In the 1990s, communication studies in the Arab World were bound to be impacted by emerging globalization, itself enabled by

² Daniel Lerner, The Passing of Traditional Societies: Modernizing the Middle East (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1958).

³ Awatef Abdul Rahman, Communication and Cultural Dependency Issues in the Third World [in Arabic] (Kuwait: National Council for Culture and Arts, 1984).

the rise of transnational communication technologies such as satellite television. Many Arab media scholars argued that globalization was posing a serious threat to Arab-Islamic values and traditions and called on national media to maintain indigenous cultures and languages. Amin's critical view of globalization as a brutal and hegemonic process enabled by modern communications technologies⁴ generated a good deal of interest among academics and policy makers across the region. Media education curricula came to include new courses on globalization and satellite television, while research works sought to throw light on how transnational media were impacting the region's communications⁵ and socio-political and cultural norms.⁶

The Current State of Communication Studies: the Empowerment *Perspective*

As the new century dawned on the Arab region, it was clear that digital and online communications were presenting a serious challenge to traditional, state-operated mass media. The ability of social media platforms to give a voice to the average person in a state-controlled communication environment was hailed across the region as highly empowering. And the implications for communications studies have been quite immense. Universities across the region came to introduce new curricula aiming at educating new generations of young communicators in digital media techniques and concepts. Topics such as social media, citizen journalism, media convergence, digital photography, digital video, online journalism, visual storytelling, virtual public relations, digital advertising, new media theories, social analytics, big data, website design, webcasting, blogging, and cybermedia ethics and laws have made headlines in the region's media education curricular maps.⁷

During my thirty-five year career as a media educator and researcher, I have seen communication studies in the Arab World adapt dynamically at the regional, national, and global scale to significant political, economic, and technological developments. But the rush to engage with digital and online communications on the part of media educators, scholars, and professionals seems remarkably unprecedented. If long-time state domination of the region's media landscape was perceived as the black tunnel in which the region's communications have historically evolved, digital empowerment came to be seen as "the light at the end of that tunnel." Three political/military developments that fostered the region's perceptions of the power of social media and digital communications in the past two decades seem to be cases in point: the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq (2003), the Arab Spring (2011-2013), and the Palestinian-Israeli military conflict of May 2021. The US occupation of Iraq in April

⁴ Jalal Amin, Globalization [in Arabic] (Cairo: Dar Al Ma'aref, 1996).

⁵ Mohammad Ayish, "Arab Television Goes Commercial: A Case Study of the Middle East Broadcasting Centre," Gazette 59, no. 6 (1997): 473-494. ⁶ Douglas Boyd, Broadcasting in the Middle East (Des Moines, Iowa: Iowa State University Press, 1999).

⁷ Mohammad Ayish, "Arab Media Studies" in The International History of Communication Study, ed. Peter Simonson and David Park (New York: Routledge, 2016), 476.

2003 came to receive wide coverage on emerging online national and international news platforms that were widely perceived across the region as more diverse and freer than state-operated media. Ralph Berenger, who had worked for 13 years at both the American University of Cairo and the American University of Sharjah initiated his "Media Go to Cyber War" scholarly project that culminated in a valuable collection of research works dealing with cyber media's handling of the Iraq conflict.⁸ The real spike in scholarly interest in online media in the Arab World, however, came during the second decade of the century and was triggered mainly by upheavals across the region referred to as the "Arab Spring." Social media platforms accessible to the region's populations were widely viewed as catalysts for the popular uprisings. The region's researchers drew on empowerment theory to address social media contributions to the Arab Spring, but the majority of those studies were descriptive and drew on historical and conventional quantitative methods.9 Finally, the third development most likely to attract scholarly attention in the region has been the May 8-14, 2021 outbreak of violence in Palestine. During this conflict, social media was viewed as a key tool for mobilizing public opinion, and the resulting conversation about the role of social media in politics has raised high expectations about what cyberspace could deliver in times of crisis, particularly when state-run communications are failing to provide the full picture of the conflict.

Implications for Communication Studies

It is clear that the history of communication studies in the Arab World will continue to be defined by regional and global political, technological, and socio-cultural developments. The region's growing investments in digital communications have converged with regional political conflicts, social upheavals, and cultural concerns to position digital and online features at the center of the region's communication education and scholarship. These developments offer both opportunities and challenges for media educators, scholars, and professional practitioners. Media education programs could benefit from the empowering aspects of digital communications in enhancing knowledge about political participation, democratization, multiculturalism, and diversity in their curricula. In research, media studies could also make use of the emerging field of digital humanities and especially big data analytics for long-term historical investigations of media behavior across time as well as for enhancing qualitative aspects of scholarship.

On the other hand, communication studies in the region will continue to face the challenge of freedom deficiency in the region. We

⁸ Ralph Berenger, ed., Cybermedia Go to War: Role of Converging Media During and After the 2003 Iraq War (Spokane, Washington: Marquette Books, 2006).

⁹ Adam Smidi and Saif Shahin, "Social Media and Social Mobilization in the Middle East: A Survey of Research on the Arab Spring," India Quarterly 73, no. 2 (June 2017): 196-209.

have to remember that as much as digital communications have provided individuals with access to a global public sphere, they have also enabled states to tighten their grip on the media landscape. Cybermedia laws enacted over the past decades across the Arab World could be hugely detrimental to the development of sustainable communication studies in areas of education, research, and professional practice. In addition, media educators should be sensitized to the fact that teaching online and digital media is not a technical concern but a pursuit that also involves significant social and cultural knowledge that students should engage in. In this context, the liberal arts education model that enables students' exposure to knowledge from the humanities and social sciences should be maintained in digitally-centered media education programs. In digital communication-focused scholarship, the region's researchers should be mindful of that fact that algorithm-driven analysis would be no alternative to their interpretations of data to understand the human living experience.

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