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Compte rendu de "Bullets and Bulletins: Media and Politics in the Wake of the Arab Uprisings"

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Mohamed Zayani & Suzi Mirgani, Bullets and Bulletins: Media and Politics in the Wake of the Arab Uprisings

(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 254, ISBN 978-0190491550

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Since their outbreak in December 2010, the Arab uprisings have received attention from local, regional and international actors, whether through politics, media or academia. Most of the previous published books were relying on journalistic information but only a few of them tried to explain this journalistic approach through a solid academic project.

Published in 2016 and divided into three parts, *Bullets and Bulletins: Media and Politics in the Wake of Arab Uprisings* is an edited book that emphasises the three aspects mentioned above: an academic research project is conducted by scholars to study the interaction between the media sphere and the political debate in the Arab uprisings' context.

The book's first chapter, written by Suzi Mirgani, introduces the different topics discussed in this collective work. It also presents the Arab media's situation in the wake of Arab uprisings between censorship, authoritarianism and a more open media space, depending on the country and on the society.

The first part analyses the transition of the Arab media by underlining the region's evolving media scene. Mohamed Zayani retraces, in chapter 2, the transformation of the Arab mediascape that gradually became more vibrant, more diverse and more open, mainly with the launch of Al Jazeera in 1996 that led other channels to imitate its programmes and talk shows. It also highlights the importance of the regional events that resulted in Western channels broadcasting in Arabic, and gives prominence to the role played by social media in the Arab uprisings' context.

Chapter 3 is written by Fatima el Issawi and consists of a comparative study of the transitions of traditional media industries in Tunisia, Libya and Egypt. It shows how in the first two countries, the transitions were only possible once the political movements started to take place because of the state's monopoly and control, while they were already in process in the latter given the "relaxation of the regime's restrictions, and the introduction of private presses and satellite television stations" (p. 52). The author, who conducted many qualitative interviews in this work, underlines nevertheless how the journalists were not able to "follow the strict model of impartiality" (p. 60) despite their efforts to replace the unilateral view by a variety of opinions.

As for chapter 4, its author Naila Hamdy considers the culture of Arab journalism through an historic approach that allows retracing the transformation of journalism in the region since the Ottoman Empire up to the Arab uprisings. This chapter shows how newspapers and presses were established in the nineteenth century under Ottoman rule and then had to circumvent or accept censorship and authoritarianism under the colonial Powers and the regimes established after the colonial rule. According to the author, satellite and social media played a very important role in the Arab uprisings by contradicting the state-owned news channels and by offering another version of the events.

The second part of this book is called 'Space and the Cultural Production of Arab Media'. It is also divided into three chapters.

Chapter 5, written by Dina Matar, evokes the role of stories in political activism in Syria. In this chapter, the author analyses stories used by activists to persuade and mobilise. Many examples of short films made by individuals are given to illustrate this purpose. These examples are intended to show how citizens become activists and try to send a particular political message, mainly through social media. This form of initiative is considered to be an alternative form of journalism, allowing individuals to communicate their message without the need to pass through the traditional or official media. It has its benefits but also its risks because those who take such initiatives can be subject to persecution.

The author of chapter 6, Marwan M. Kraidy, stresses the use of public space and street art in the popular movements. He argues that the role of public spaces evolves over time and according to the regime in place. These public spaces played a primary role in the Arab uprisings because they symbolised not only civil disobedience but also an important site of contact between demonstrators and authorities. Protestors used political graffiti to communicate their demands in the public spaces, a phenomenon that became a symbolic expression of Arab modernity and societal transformations.

In chapter 7, the author Joe Khalil utilises a critical political economy approach to analyse regional media cities such as those in Beirut, Cairo, Amman and Dubai. According to the author, these media cities can be considered as a compact reflection of a civil society because they are related each one to the other. What occurs in one has consequences for the other. This phenomenon was observable in the Arab uprisings' context because the political events allowed the development of new media hybridisations between Arab nations and new forms of cultural production. But these events also affected the media cities in Beirut, Cairo and Amman because of insecurity. Only Dubai was able to strengthen its position in media production. The author underlines however the importance of Beirut in producing pan Arab artistic programmes such as *Arab Got Talent* and *The Voice*, despite the political insecurity in Lebanon, given the country's westernisation.

The third and final part of this book is related to media, state interests and non-state actors.

Chapter 8, written by Abeer AlNajjar, frames political Islam by taking Revolutionary Egypt as a case study. It shows how channels with different political views present events in totally different ways. The author privileges the 2013 pro- and anti-Morsi demonstrations' coverage by state-owned and private local channels, as well as regional and international channels. She concludes that the events' presentations are highly manipulated by the different channels according to their

own political orientation, and that each channel presents political Islam according to its own perception and conviction.

As for chapter 9, its author Zahera Harb analyses a non-state actor's implication in a war and its coverage by this actor's channel. It is about Hezbollah's intervention in Syria and how Al-Manar, a local Lebanese channel covered the war. This chapter shows how this TV channel had a particular coverage of the Syrian crisis because of Hezbollah's intervention to help the Syrian regime: contrary to other channels such Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya, Al Manar presented the protestors as terrorist groups. The channel also covered widely the demonstrations in Bahrain, a Gulf Sunni monarchy with a population mostly Shi'a to support the demonstrations, unlike its discourse regarding the Syrian crisis. The authors also compare Al Manar to Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya, who did not cover the Bahraini events but paid major attention to the Syrian ones and accused the Syrian regime of violating human rights. She comes to the conclusion that non-state actors also defend their interests and political orientation through the media, this latter becoming a primary tool for political communication.

The last chapter in this book is dedicated to US public diplomacy and how the American government uses media to connect with both local and international publics. The author Philip Seib proceeds to a historic approach to retrace previous efforts such as *Voice of America* during the Second World War and *Voice of Arabs* in the 1950s. He also gives the example of Al Jazeera, perceived by viewers as a tool to promote the Qatari foreign policy. As for the US, it took benefit from the Arab audience's segmentation – due to social and political reasons – to target certain groups with a particular message to transmit. The author of chapter 10 considers that this will continue to be the case as long as the Arab audience is getting more and more fragmented because of the different political orientations and the partial coverage of events by local and regional channels.

From what has been written above about this book, it is clear that this collective work is interesting to read for many reasons. First, from a methodological point of view, the different authors either conducted interviews or relied on a socio-historic approach to analyse the role played by media in the Arab uprisings' coverage. Their purposes were theoretically supported, which is always an added value in the social sciences.

Second, it offers the reader – mainly the one who does not have enough knowledge about the region and its history – a wide yet solid package on the recent regional events. It also provides the reader with a good knowledge on some of the main actors present in this region and how the media is treating the issue according to their own perception and interests.

Moreover, many topics are discussed within one book: traditional media, social media, street art, non-state actors and public diplomacy are all reunited to equip the readers with the information they need to understand the geopolitical, societal and communicational issues in the region.

It would have been more rewarding however in some cases if concrete examples had been given to illustrate the authors' purposes and convince a potential hesitant reader. Most of the time, the argumentation is not followed nor preceded by an empirical example that makes the authors' thesis more convincing, especially when it comes to the political use of media to communicate a particular message or make propaganda for an ideology or a political orientation.

When it comes to the non-state actors and their use of media to communicate, it would have been interesting to have a comparative approach with another political party with a different political orientation that communicates its view through another channel. A comparison between Al-Manar and Future TV that belongs to the Future Movement, an anti-Syrian regime Lebanese party (and thus against Hezbollah's intervention in Syria), would have been of added value in chapter 9 for example.

Moreover, it would have been compelling to have a comparative semantic analysis while talking about the different channels' coverage. For instance, Western media channels each presents the events in its own way and using particular words in its discourse: CNN, BBC, Sky News, Russia Today and France 24 were using different codes and were following a different editorial line depending on the event and it would have been interesting to compare them, especially in a public diplomacy context by enlarging the analysis to different countries, rather than only focusing on the US public diplomacy in the Arab world.

Consequently, this collective work is a good contribution to academia when it comes to the media use and communication in a changing political order. It could also inspire other researchers to develop more some points and ideas or have new ones that could also be of great contribution to the academic world in general and to social sciences in particular.