

Book Review

Media in the Middle East: A Comprehensive Handbook

*Yahya R. Kamalipour and Hamid Mowlana, eds. Westport
and London: Greenwood Press, 1994, 333 pp.*

As evidenced by its subtitle, this book is a mighty ambitious work. The editors, recognizing the "woeful lack of information on the [Middle East's] media systems," present the book as "the first comprehensive study of the structure and functions of the mass media in the Middle East." And it took a lot of hard work, being the "culmination of more than two years of research and writing by 32 mass media scholars from across the Middle East and the United States."

The book covers twenty-one countries. The Middle East is defined here as most Arab countries (Morocco, Sudan, Yemen, and Somalia were left out) plus Iran, Turkey, Israel, Pakistan, and Afghanistan.

There is no question that a serious gap in information exists in the area the book attempts to cover. It is also safe to say that the researchers involved did a great job, assembling in one volume a wealth of information on the structure of the media in the Middle East. One can at a glance glean up-to-date information about what publications are produced in each country, who owns them, what radio and television channels are available, what times they broadcast, what regulations exist, and how the media fit in the fuller picture.

But it is this last point where the book leaves a lot to be desired. Far from offering the full picture, the book leaves a gap as wide as the one it had hoped to fill. It uses a circumspect, sometimes misleading, language to describe states of affairs in the area covered. While the use of moderate and restrained language is to be commended in an academic work like this, one cannot dispel the suspicion that this restraint has been dictated by marketing considerations. The editors and publishers appear to have hoped that this volume would be used widely as a reference in most of the universities of the countries concerned.

But this has resulted in a rather distorted picture. One may be forgiven for feeling that the book describes what Martians might see if they visited planet Earth. Witness, for example, the following quote on television in the United Arab Emirates:

Programme One broadcasts on Channels 2, 10, 30, 38 and 41, starting at 4:00 P.M. and sign-off at 12:50 A.M. Catering exclusively to Arab audiences, telecasts are produced locally and typically include a mix of humour, sports, documentary film, a serial, news (at 8:00 P.M. and 10:00 P.M.), medical magazine, wrestling, and an Arabic play. Sign-off at 12:50 A.M. is preceded by a recitation of the Qur'an and playing the national anthem.

Well, I may stand corrected. A Martian might need a little guidance to digest this information, like having to be taught the difference between a serial, a play, and a film, or what the Qur'an or national anthem are. However, for ordinary mortals, much more reading between the lines is needed to find out what really goes on in the media in the countries involved. For example, one is told very innocently that "mass media in the UAE follows a dualistic structure wherein print media are privately owned, and electronic media, including the official news agency, Emirates News Agency (WAM) are government owned." Fair enough. But read on, and you are told that the three major Arabic dailies are actually government-owned. On further examination, one discovers that the rest are owned by big families associated closely with the ruling family. Go back a little, and you are told that the power in the state is vested in the Supreme Council of Rulers, comprising the hereditary rulers of the seven emirates. This council elects a ruler, in whom all executive and legislative powers are vested, and who, in turn, appoints a sort of parliament, the forty-man Federal National Council. We are even given the valuable information that this arrangement "fulfills a major Islamic principle—that of shura, or consultation whereby a ruler who wields absolute authority is obliged to consult a small, informal council of members of the ruling family and social and religious opinion leaders." Well, I didn't know that!

When, after all of this, we are told that the UAE's mass media "continue to fulfill the communications needs not only of the indigenous population but also of the expatriate community" and informed that the "political

stability that the UAE has enjoyed since its inception" makes it "safe to predict a continued thriving of the UAE's mass media industries, nurtured and sustained by a pragmatic and benign leadership," you know what to think.

The reader may not be very surprised, then, to be told that the problems the opposition press in Tunisia are facing are "mainly financial," or that the major problem with the Tunisian media is the imbalance between electronic and print media (in favor of the former), which tends to create an elitist culture, and that the remedy is to teach media courses at the secondary school level! Even a visitor from Mars would have noticed that Tunisia's main opposition party is outlawed and that its leaders are in exile, prison, or shallow graves. The BBC correspondent, a bit of a Martian himself, stumbled on some of these facts and was expelled last year. But a researcher who spent two years examining the media there and who is apparently "assistant professor of journalism at the Institute of Press and Information Science in Tunisia" is apparently too preoccupied with logging the circulation figures of government-owned publications to notice such minor details.

The need for a companion book to translate the remarks made in this volume is highlighted by many other items. Witness this quote on Oman: "If the ongoing progress in the mass media indicates anything, it is that the Omanis have learned how adroitly to steer a course that accepts change in the future while maintaining a firm grasp on one's heritage." And this in a country that is the personification of one-man rule, where, as the book itself says, "the sultan rules with the advice of an appointed cabinet . . . and legislation is by decree." In other words, where one man talks to himself all the time, while the rest of the people have to listen.

Any surprise, then, when we read this about Libya: "In general, a high degree of dissatisfaction exists among both the Libyan population and the large community of foreign workers and diplomats presently living in Libya concerning the nature and quality of television and radio programs. One of the main reasons is the hiring of technical and administrative staff on political criteria rather than on expertise or knowledge." Note taken. But how about driving journalists into exile and sending hit squads to murder them abroad? Or this on Syria: "The mass media in Syria is strongly influenced by the ruling Ba'ath Party and is geared towards sustaining and promoting Arab culture, patriotism and nationalism." You have to read another chapter in the book to know that the Syrian government blew up a transmitter owned by the PLO to maintain this "influence" on the media, and you have to read other books to find out about how this influence is maintained and extended abroad. Need one, then, go to the chapter on Iraq to hear the complaint that the ruling party's control of the media and the media production "limits the degree of diversity both in content and type of media available in Iraq," and limits the "presence of entertainment programming"? Why, this is not true—there are plenty of televised show trials, executions, and severing of limbs and ears. What do Iraqis need to watch *Terminator II* for?

To reiterate, this book is informative and valuable, if not informative enough. And what it does not say is not less important than what it says.

One is surprised, on reading this book, to find out that Turkey is much more liberal in its press laws than generally believed, although it still is far from being a truly liberal-democratic society. Of all the countries covered, Turkey, Pakistan, and Jordan seem to have the freest media in relative terms. Lebanon, which is one of the most diverse, does not appear as free in its media as the dominant myth has it. Iraq, Syria, Libya, and most Gulf states have the most draconian restrictions on the media. In all of the twenty-one countries, the state maintains a monopoly on the electronic media and news agencies. Turkey, Lebanon, Pakistan, and the UAE show some signs of diversifying in this field, with Turkey being the most advanced.

Such new technologies like satellite transmission are making the task of media control more difficult, but the governments are adapting fast. Most governments have set up their own satellites, with Saudi Arabia and the UAE actually achieving great success in harnessing the new technologies to enhance their control of the media beyond their borders. Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco are following close behind. It might be that the new technologies could lead to more state control of information, not more freedom.

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