

Review:

Arabités numériques. Le printemps du Web arabe

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Internet studies, democracy, cyberactivism, activism, Internet security, Middle East, Internet, Arab Spring, media studies, social media

Arabités numériques. Le printemps du Web arabe. Yves Gonzalez-Quijano. Paris: Sindbad, 2012. ISBN 978-2-330-01317-2, 190 pages.

To say that the Arab Spring 2011–2012 is closely associated with new electronical cultures seems to be a generally accepted truism. The book under review examines this phenomenon in much greater depth, which step by step takes into consideration all relevant political, social, cultural and technical aspects of the complex nature of the Arab e-revolutions. They were revolutions (the term is favoured by the Arabs) without leaders, their role being played by modern media. The ideas of anti-establishment protest were conceived and discussed mainly via Facebook, coordinated and translated into concise practical instructions via Twitter. The ensuing events were visualized via YouTube, which brought the news to the world.

An important part of Gonzalez-Quijano's both descriptive and analytical presentation is a historical account. A detailed survey points out that the Arab world of 2011 was not a digital desert. The young "Internet generation" (the shebab) and the "network readiness" have been quickly emerging and growing from one million Internet users in 2001 to maybe more than 100 million today. The well-arranged boxed table on pp. 68–70 shows the development of the Arab web before the events. The share of individual countries seems quite symptomatic: the first Arab country effectively connected by Internet was Tunisia (since 1987/91), followed by

Bahrain, Egypt, Morocco, Syria and others. In Egypt a special ministry for information technology was founded in 1999 and the Facebook came to use in September 2006. Furthermore, the historical account given in the book under review comprises analyses of the political issues appearing on the web as well as of clashes between the régimes and bloggers who dared criticize them. In this connection the reader can learn a number of names of icons and heroes of the political web as well as of victims and even martyrs of a repression. Some of the names are well known, such as that of Wael Ghonim, others – both men and women – are not. It is certainly a good thing to remember them and an index of persons attached to the book is a useful tool. A noted exception to the completeness of the historical overview of the web and uprisings in the Arab world: Libya.

Special chapters are devoted to phenomena of “cyberpessimism.” Under this heading a number of issues are discussed, among them E. Morozov’s *The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom* (2011). No doubt, the Internet can weaken authoritarian régimes, but just as well it can strengthen them. In this connection Gonzalez-Quijano puts under scrutiny especially the government’s on-line media in Syria, which have been for years ready to face critical attacks of the opposition. Another dark side can be expected in the Arab world from the angle of radical Islamism, in an extreme formula of a “cyberjihad.” Our author records the rapid growth of the cyberspace in Saudi Arabia (including a wide spread consumption of YouTube) as well as increasing on-line activities of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, but does not dwell at length on these issues. In general, his approach to them is moderate and carefully based on available evidence.

In contrast, a great attention is paid to the transnational aspects of the information technology. The author puts to discussion the very term of the Arab Internet: where are its boundaries? Does it depend on who are producers, or consumers, or is it a matter of language? Some Arab bloggers do not hesitate to use English, some others use Arabizi that is romanized Arabic mixed with numerical symbols for phonemes that do not occur in the Latin/English script. On the whole, however, the Arabization – in a

wider sense than just linguistic – keeps going ahead. Google, for instance, started its Arabized version in 2008. But in spite of the remarkable Arab digital activism, the modern media still do not cease to be often regarded as means of promotion of foreign interests and, in particular, of the US domination.

The e-revolution in the Arab world, however, has without any doubt a wider meaning than just democratic political change with all problems arising as its aftermath. It has brought a new socio-economic boom, a progress of education and an overall liberalization, including the economic life and the emancipation of women. The interconnectedness within the Arab world, started in the past generation with all-Arab printed media and then with Al-Jazeera, has been greatly increased and pushed towards more active interaction in the spirit of the Web 2.0. Yves Gonzalez-Quijano concludes his multifaceted portrayal of the current social and cultural processes with a characterization of the present-day Arab “society in conversation” as a new way of “horizontal” self-identification of the Arab youth, distinct from the “vertical” political models of Arabism in the past. His book is a fascinating reading, probably the most comprehensive and topical grasp of the issue in French today and rich in reliable information and ideas that can offer inspiration just as well to the expert readership of the CyberOrient.