

## Book Review:

**Zayani, Mohammed, and Joe F. Khalil. 2024.**  
*The Digital Double Bind: Change and Stasis in the Middle East.*  
New York: Oxford University Press

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### *Abstract*

*Summarizing the past twenty-plus years of internet media studies on the Middle East, this study pulls together thinking and findings about digital citizenship, frames, and sites of contention, “new” voices and “virtual” lives online, e-commerce and “knowledge” economies, “connected” culture and digital identities in the region. Its overall methodology is to assess how large, generic models apply to regional experience. The authors, who work and teach there, press beyond older diffusion-of-innovations paradigms to remap stasis and change bracketed by interplays of informational freedom and state management of communication as digital double binds, finding liberalizations on the margins more of personal and artistic expression than of political mobilization.*

### *Keywords*

*Media, Middle East, Internet, politics of communication*

“This project,” the authors write, “has been long in the making.” Their book summarizes two decades of engagement with “the study of media and communications developments in the Middle East” to ferret out how, “even for the casual observer of the Middle East, the digital has been a driving force of change” Their chosen frame to render it is that old-faithful, “stasis and change,” with a new player, “the digital,” by which they mean media, particularly on the internet. Their treatment is best read as a sifting and summarizing of observations, attempted conceptualizations, and comparisons that current research has largely left behind in a turn from essentializing abstractions to close attention to media uses and communicative practices behind them. The shift was signaled at the beginning of their period and passed the metaphor stage by the time Mohammed Zayani and Joe Khalil closed the book on what we now can see as the first stage of thinking about the digital as worldview and the internet as its locus through the lens of media forged in mass media and modernization theory. It is there, in thinking about media and modernization, that they encounter the familiar conundrum that stasis lurks beneath the froth of change and rolling change beneath apparent and puzzling stasis. Abjuring the usual demons of imperialism and its residues in boundaries (and elites) forged under imperialism, they propose a different conceptualization for digital and other divides as double binds, the damned-if-you-do-and-damned-if-you-don’t concept that Gregory Bateson introduced into social science in the 1930s to capture the reality of choice-taking and decision-making in which structures (such as of value and action and more commonly in institutions) do not align and contradictions do not resolve dialectically. Bateson hazarded that this failure to resolve might account for schizophrenia, which has since shown to be biologically rather than psychologically based. The implication here is that it fits politics of anger, craziness, and acting-out.

Taking Bateson as their point of departure, Zayani and Khalil immediately deny that they mean mere contradiction, paradox, or irony but are less clear about what they do mean to capture. This becomes an annoying habit throughout, until they get to the point on which political and media analyses converge—namely, governance or what critical theory casts as “agency” (as opposed to structure) and its strongest form as “power.” Power is, of

course, the strong force in postmodern theory, which claims that that power underlies both consensus, which obsessed modernists in the social sciences, and dissensus or conflict that haunted their searches for order in the social, political, economic, and cultural world. Eschewing definition—which is another postmodern tactic—Zayani and Khalil take a hundred pages to get to their point that contemporary states in the Middle East are caught between the Scylla of embracing open information and communication technologies and a Charybdis of controlling information and communication as resources of power. Then they immediately show this is not true—that states’ agencies can play the same game as those who would bypass or challenge them with IT, and from commanding positions. Yet, even as a fleeting moment, this is a compelling proposition that many observers have noted, but more as an empirical fact than as an existential proposition. On this field, Zayani and Khalil are writing as experienced researchers in near and enduring proximity to the beast, the state or at least rulers as Leviathan, without quite registering how it and ICTs are both cut down to size here by positioning as peripheral capitalism. It is, of course, to escape this or at least to meliorate it that many, including the state’s own agents, embrace ICTs as a development tool, development sector, and model for developing an alternative or at least kinder and hopefully more efficient world to which modernization has brought development but not much liberalization. So, is double-bind theory up to the analytical task? Does it bring together a smattering of incomplete descriptions tricked out with spurious additional theory into a more coherent view, or at least a better starting point for further research?

The main contribution to this book is to bring together a mass of incomplete descriptions and premature conceptualizations in which “the digital” in the Middle East has largely meant the internet with the internet viewed primarily as media and so to be measured against others. In more lapidary moments, comparative political science comes to the rescue in sorting out “ecologies” or “geographies” of media, by which they mean to get past the rush to generalize and begin to map specific media—blogs that provide for individual expression versus forums that assemble communities—down to even more specific media such as Facebook, which developed as a site for affirmative self-presentation (primarily for friends and family), to WhatsApp,

X (formerly Twitter), Telegram, and others for instant messaging that extend beyond indexical communication (aka, signaling) to information-sharing in exigent circumstances, some critical-political and others boringly mundane. The service here is a crucial step toward the turn to practice of which this book is otherwise almost entirely innocent. In sorting the data, such as it is, and concepts, such as they are, into situations of use, we begin to see parameters of communicative and information-handling practices that move analysis in the direction of choice-taking and decision-making that are the empirical stuff of practice theory, which has taken the field elsewhere. With that turn, we begin to see the what and why of individual choices not just to take up “the digital” in some comprehensive sense but to sift and sort through alternatives, and the more so as more become available, which raises the possibility of looking beyond Zayani and Khalil’s type site of states’ both promoting and constraining IT development that, frankly, looks inflated by viewing it through a media lens. Other actions mean other actors—and, more precisely, other roles.

Just laying out alternative uses has the added benefit of opening the field to more disciplined comparison with research findings from, say, North America and Southeast Asia, two sites of very active research and of extending the Middle East to North Africa, where Zayani has long researched digital activism. In these places, researchers have long noticed that different “technologies,” or programs, lend themselves to different uses, and that much of what newer, less tech-adept users do is repurpose them. Before there were “social media,” announced by a marketing guru as “Web 2.0,” and even before the Web, LISTSERVs for sharing information morphed into NEWSGROUPS for online communities soon to be recognized as “virtual.” Shortly thereafter, it was noted that teenagers sorted their online activity into Facebook for family-and-friends affirmations, which one researcher called a “pottery barn” world of the bland and conventional as opposed to MySpace that took an edgier more “goth” tone as advertisements for bands and artists. Similarly, in the Middle East, Zayani and Khalil note that blogs came to serve for individual expression while online forums, which most foreign observers overlooked (or could not access if they were in Arabic) served as sites for expressing and exploring community ties, which perhaps excites

anthropologists more than it draws postmodern political science and media studies in hot pursuit of “agency.”

This potential in comparative studies goes underdeveloped, even eschewed, out of twin fears of “technological determinism” (in the independent variable) and “orientalism” (in the dependent variable). So determined are they to steer away any tendency to reify technology as design (except in occasional evocations of the weird and deeply problematic concept of “affordances” originally borrowed from design theory to express a weak causality) that they overlook how technologists write their values into technologies they develop, whether as programmers creating algorithms or as users repurposing programs. Although affirming that they recognize this, the weakest parts of this book are its discussions of infrastructures, technologists, and technological cultures that, drawing largely on programmatic and marketing material, they have no way of exploring with double-bind theory, which admits of no resolution other than losing one’s mind or abandoning the field. Their own double bind is that going there is the path of “orientalism,” which for a generation has stood in the way of substantive understanding as “othering” narrative. One result here is to limit the scope of their treatment to media and technologies that support and convey media both large and small into adjacent cultural industries and quasi-political domains. Notwithstanding tendencies of media studies to be over-impressed by the expressive, there is surely more to taking clean streets campaigns or complaints about corruption and police violence online than as training grounds for political mobilization. With gestures to e-government and e-commerce ( which typically aim to reduce the “personal” element that shape those as favors), this book does not explore the local world of education research, fintech and other application developers, or the inner bowels of STEM training that produces much of the new elite, or even the growing industry of marketing and market research in tech and media sectors, although it does retail some of the latter’s propositions. The principal focus here is on those areas of media, and comparisons of media, in which political science and communications studies long overlap, plus some new additions in “culture industries,” which is where the turn to practice, and particularly expressive practice, seems to point. Their discussion of these latter, even as industries sandwiched between “knowledge production” and “e-commerce,”

points beyond the dilemma of the authoritarian state (and of naturalizing that dilemma). As much as the ultimate beckons, social science proceeds at more immediate levels of practice than “technological determinism” and “orientalism” which turns to practice—that is, from identifying alternatives to exploring actual choices—have largely left behind in working up from the ethnographic ground instead of down from commanding heights.

Currently, for working social scientists, that way is shown by works such as Elisabetta Costa’s study of social media use in Mardin, Turkey, that came out of the group around Daniel Miller and their seminal work on multiple uses and registers of the internet in Trinidad, or John Postill’s on localized digital politics and political engagement in Southeast Asia that goes beyond mere evocations of practice theory to implement various of Pierre Bourdieu’s specifications of practice theory, or Mark Peterson’s explorations of the metapragmatics of social media uses in Cairo, and a host of other works that combine actors’ reflections and attention to practical choices (see Bibliography). Many of these choices are conflictual, indecisive, indeterminate without being unresolved in the fashion of Batesonian double-binds. For those that prove to be, this book may provide a jumping-off point, and for others a *summa* of how we got to what looks more like an analytical impasse.

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