

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

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*The Digital Double Bind. Change and Stasis in the Middle East*, by Mohamed Zayani and Joe F. Khalil (2024), makes an ambitious attempt to tackle the Middle East and North Africa's multifaceted digital cultures. As the authors explain, the complexity stems from the region's contrasting demographics, numerous languages, diverse social, political, religious and economic interests. The text is divided into five parts, covering the broad areas of: (I) Conjunctures and Disjunctures; (II) Aspirations and Hindrances; (III) Expression and Suppression; (IV) Imitations and Innovation; (V) Connectivity and Collectivity. This involves a *longue durée* approach to relay how digital cultures are emerging out of the region's hybrid political, sociocultural and media traditions. To grasp these conflicting forces, Zayani and Khalil (2024) raise complex questions, such as: why have Middle Eastern and North African activists continued to use tools that are being censored and surveilled by governments? And why do Middle Eastern and North African governments continue to invest in technologies that could lead to audiences challenging the state? Moreover, the study enquires as to why cultural conservatives in the region are promoting the very infrastructures that are leading to a liberalisation of their societies? The authors underscore that these queries are vital to conceive of the Middle East and North Africa's contradictory top-down mobilisation and yet uneven uptake of digital cultures to simultaneously marketise, suppress and monitor but also liberate and energise the region.

To mitigate technological determinism, reductivism and exceptionalism of much digital scholarship concerning the Middle East, Zayani and Khalil (2024: 8) build on the sociological notion of the 'digital double bind' to articulate this ambivalent terrain. They make the pertinent point that, since the Middle East is as vast as it is varied, the west is definitely not the main referent and attempting to conceive of its digital cultures in either orientalist or universal terms would be at best misleading and at worst ethnocentric. Conversely, the authors address the regions' internal complexities, including political Islam; local feminisms; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) populations' rights (or lack thereof); the sense of muted modernity; and pockets of discontent within its predominantly young population, the majority of whom are under thirty years of age. One of the book's most significant arguments is that, while the digital turn can be defined in sociocultural terms, it is far from complete. Hence, some areas

of the Middle East and North Africa, like parts of Yemen, are pre-digital. Conversely, so-called 'smart' cities like Qatar and Dubai are postdigital as offline/online spaces are seamlessly enfolded (Hurley, 2023a). Simultaneously, the region's digital turn involves concentric spirals of transitions, twists and turns. Consequently, these digital constellations are creating very different realities, imaginaries and discourses for different social actors, political platforms and market forces. However, although the prose is consistently provocative, since the study covers so much empirical and conceptual territory, analysis is broadbrush at times and tends to skit from one subject to the next.

Nevertheless, although the book is not primarily within the domain of audience studies, the final chapter 'Collectivity, Identity and Connectivity', offers noteworthy insights into the entangled predicaments of regional audiences. The authors articulate the role of everyday digital cultures, including gaming; e-commerce; social movements; and social media, etc., in providing audiences with participatory, performative, imagined and (albeit) hegemonic affordances. The authors convey the sticky allure of the digital double bind as a kind of Velcro that consecutively attracts, showcases and absorbs civil issues, political tensions, environmental concerns and matters of social justice. This chapter aligns with studies articulating the punctured political scope of fandom communities in providing collective, subjective yet commercialised outlets while countering the techno-optimism of scholars like Henry Jenkins (2016). For instance, the discussion of Hudda Kattan, the beauty mogul of Iraqi-American descent, gets to the crux of the double bind of commercial capitalism. Kattan, as the authors point out, has taken the region by storm as an icon of Middle Eastern cosmopolitanism while using her social media platforms to highlight, not only her international cosmetics conglomeration, but regional political issues, like the situation in Palestine and her criticism of 'Instagram's practice of deleting posts about Palestine' (Zayani and Khalil, 2024: 219-220). These forms of digital activism are being circumnavigated by platforms like Meta who frequently shadowban political posts in the region (Hurley, 2023b). Additionally, Zayani and Khalil (2024: 21) provide an important discussion of Egypt's so-called 'TikTok girls', including Mawada El-Adham and Haneen Hossam, who were sentenced to prison terms for influencer promotions deemed immoral. These cases, amongst others, illustrate to the reader how politically charged it is to be, not only a woman influencer in the global south, but also a member of a digital audience. This is because although the digital realm is providing both outlets and substitutes for democracy, it necessitates self-censorship within the Middle East and North Africa's heated authoritarian climate (Hurley, 2021).

Yet, while acknowledging the tensions of the region's public sphere, and varying modes of subjectivity available to social actors, the authors miss the opportunity to focus on the significant migrant population, who flock to the Arabian Gulf, Lebanon, Israel and Egypt, to earn substantial remittances for South Asian, South East Asian and African countries (Hurley, 2023c). Sociocultural fragmentation is being exacerbated further by these transnational migrant labourers, domestic helpers, and platform service workers from various countries who live in the region for decades at a time without hope of citizenship or close physical proximities to their families (Hurley and Johnston, 2022). Arguably the region's continued dependence on a migrant workforce is being amplified by the global gig economy, which attempts to operate outside of the political arena of any single national state. While migrants are contributing substantially to the global digital economy, their presence in the Middle East and North Africa is a pivotal aspect of the region's double bind which is as much digital as it is neo-colonial. But this caveat should

not detract from the overall contribution of this book which articulates the peculiarities of Middle Eastern digital cultures and audiences. Zayani and Khalil (2024) have produced an astute, complex and insightful study of the Middle East's dynamic and eclectic digital cultures which, like elsewhere, continue to dazzle, distract and constrain.

## Biographical Note

Zoe Hurley (PhD) is an Associate Professor in the College of Interdisciplinary Studies, at Zayed University, Dubai and a Visiting Fellow in the Middle East Centre, at the London School of Economics, from 2023 to 2024. Her work focuses on semiotics, postdigital feminism(s), power and visual communication. She has published articles in leading academic journals including *New Media & Society*; *Feminist Media Studies*; *Social Media + Society*; *Information Communication & Society*; *Postdigital Science and Education*; and *Visual Communication*. Her recent monograph - *Social Media Influencing in the City of Likes: Dubai and the Postdigital Condition* (Emerald Points, 2023) expands a semiotic critique of social media's role in the global visual economy.

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