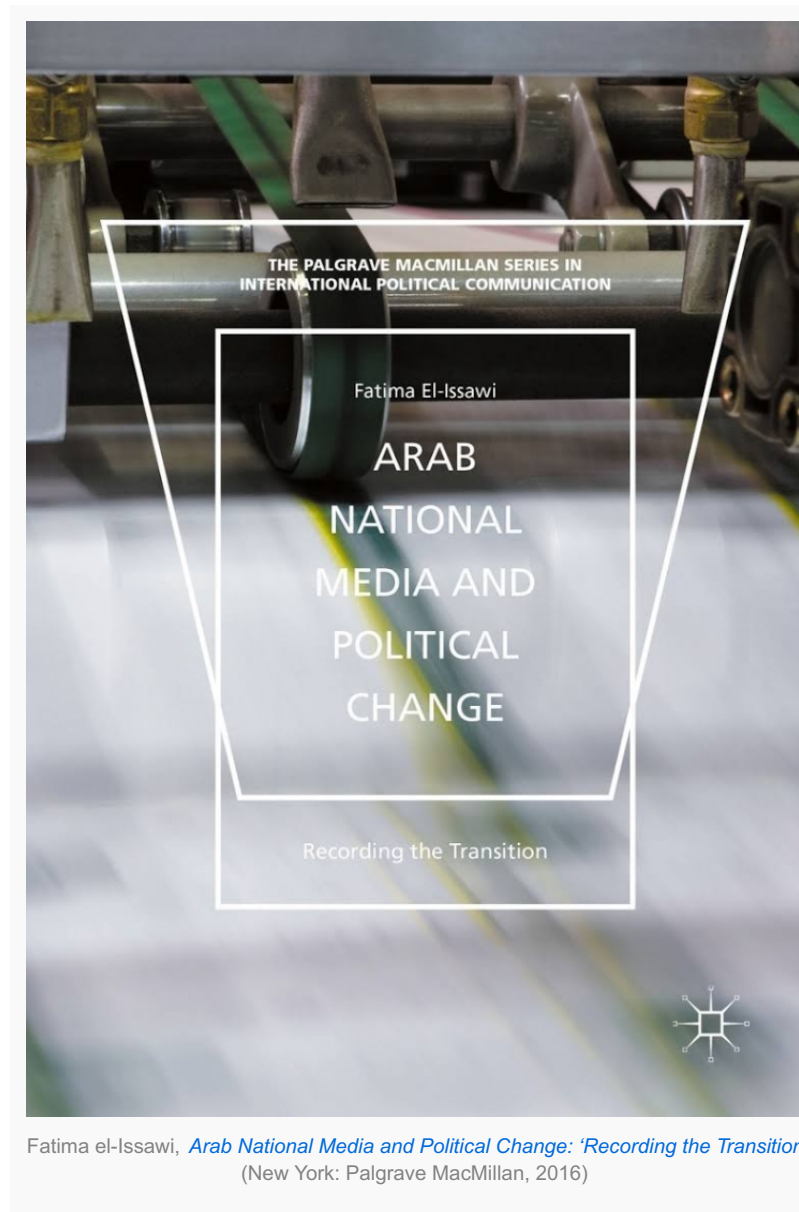


Book Review – Fatima el-Issawi’s ‘Arab National Media and Political Change’

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2017/03/02/book-review-fatima-el-issawis-arab-national-media-and-political-change/

3/2/2017

by **Monica Ibrahim**



‘I wish I could just go back to being a journalist’, said Lamees El Hadidi, Egypt’s top TV talk show host when she spoke to a crowd in autumn 2016. These words left me perplexed. Egypt’s top journalist, whose show draws an audience of millions, had disclaimed the core of her daily job. I was left with many questions about the blurred line between journalists’ identities and their professional roles, especially after the unprecedented shift in the media landscape following the Arab Spring. But my questions were thoroughly answered by Fatima el-Issawi’s book ‘Arab National Media and Political Change’.

El-Issawi’s book presents a comprehensive study of the traditional media landscape in the Arab World, outlining its role in the transition that followed the Arab Spring. It brilliantly captures the structural role of media as a major (political) actor in a period of tumultuous transition. The narrative problematises the dominant lateral link between

media and democracy by examining the institutions, operations and stakeholders of traditional Arab media.

Arab Traditional Media: A Multidimensional Approach

Taking Egypt, Tunisia and Libya as main case studies, the book dissects media power as a social institution on both structural and ideological levels. The first section of the analysis tackles the structural role of the media as a political actor in flux, constantly responding to government control. El-Issawi studies the dichotomy of old and new media in countries hit by the wave of change following the Arab Spring. She looks critically at the dynamics of regulators, legislations, and sources of funding. This section concludes that most Arab media regulatory transformations were more cosmetic than reforming, and that Tunisia's amended regulatory framework after the revolution is by far the most advanced amongst the countries studied, while nevertheless still fragile and in need of further improvements.

'The Egyptian and the Arab generally need to be told what to think. I usually try to restrict myself from telling my audience what to think, but I frequently receive phone calls urging me to tell them what to think.' Tamer Amin, talk show host, Egypt.

The second part of the analysis addresses the identity and agency of Arab journalists who had to adapt to unprecedented changes in practice, and experiment with the limits of 'new' regime control. El-Issawi accounts how Arab journalists have failed to sustain the wave of unprecedented freedom that followed the Arab Spring, following a brief period of breaking away from the shackles of state control. Political transitions have empowered hybrid media practices, where journalists dwell on the interplay between authoritarian and pluralistic practices. El-Issawi's research makes an original contribution to the literature, problematising normative Western views about the nature of the press and the role of journalists in the public domain (Christians et al., 2009; Hallin and Mancini, 2004). She proposes that Arab journalists' identity as 'citizens' charged with a 'civic duty' has superseded their role as watchdogs, and further argues that Arab journalists – especially in Egypt – perceive neutrality as less patriotic when reporting on issues of 'national security'.

The Way Forward

This comprehensive study is important for two main reasons. It could help media development initiatives in the region understand the structural and ideological effects of media regulators and journalists' identities on efforts to democratise and reform the media sector. Secondly, these insights provide an understanding on how the relationship between the media sector and the regime in power is deeply intertwined and far from unidirectional. Any study that fails to acknowledge media power as a crucial 'instrument for competing political forces' as the book suggests, would yield be incomplete.

Monica Ibrahim is a Research Assistant working on the project '[Personalised Media and Participatory Culture](#)' at the LSE Middle East Centre.

- Copyright © 2014 London School of Economics and Political Science

