

The Editor's Introduction to the Special Feature

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Since the 1990s, scholarly works on the media in the Middle East have dramatically increased. A number of books have been published discussing the new media and their impacts on the political and social realms in Middle Eastern countries. Before the 1990s, although there were differences among the nations, media in the Middle East were generally classified as the mouthpieces of authoritarian regimes since most of the mass media such as newspapers, radio, and terrestrial television were under the control of those regimes. However, the 1990s saw a rapid increase in Arabic satellite channels throughout the region. Those satellite channels offered a promise of more pluralism and free speech. Particularly, the political significance of Al-Jazeera came under the spotlight, and the channel became a model for alternative information sources on the international scene. If the latter gained international popularity after the 9-11 attacks and the war in Afghanistan in 2001, the Arab blogosphere and social networks became the core of all analyses after the so called “Arab Spring” in 2011. They revealed the potential of the internet as a trigger for mass mobilization and other forms of political movement. Today, the study of media is more than ever at the forefront of both Middle Eastern and International Communication Studies.

The period following the 1990s is often characterized by the expansion of globalization into all aspects of daily life, where everything from materials, to workers, to money and information has easily transcended national borders. In confronting these realities, many authoritarian regimes have felt threatened and have tried to cope with globalization in order to stabilize their power. As for the media industry, under global pressure for economic liberalization, many authoritarian states in the Middle East have allowed private entrepreneurs to enter the media market and operate media businesses within their national boundaries, resulting in the creation of a lot of private media companies. Although those entrepreneurs, or media moguls, usually have connections with the states' authorities or are members of the states' elite, new information technologies such as satellite television, the internet and mobile phones have become not just the tools of a small elite, but devices widely adopted by the ordinary man in the street.

In recent years, the situation has been changing: transnational TV and new media are becoming accessible to an increasing number of users. Today these “ordinary” men

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and women can get information not only from the states' institutions but also from non-state sources, as well as having the means to express themselves through several media. The number of satellite channels in the Arab world increased to nearly 450 as of 2009. Furthermore, the example of Dream TV, the famous Egyptian private satellite channel which participated in the Egyptian revolution in February 2011, shows that the private media is sometimes able to be quite critical even vis-à-vis the governments of their home countries. Moreover, in a series of political upheavals in the so called "web 2.0 revolution" (or "Facebook revolution"), the effectiveness of the Internet has been confirmed, and even if one has to admit to inequalities of access within the Arab countries, the number of users is increasing exponentially.

The challenges of this opening of media public spaces are numerous. One of these is addressed by Abdul Bari Atwan, the famous Palestinian journalist, who expresses alarm at the rise of media that lack journalistic ethics, and laments the lowering of content quality. However, one should adopt a balanced approach, neither simply lamenting nor praising excessively the quality of the contemporary media in the Middle East. By the same token, we should neither exaggerate the media's power over governments and societies, nor underestimate it. Rather, what the contemporary situation requires from us is to reveal how the current media scene has been transformed and has affected today's political and social situations in the Middle East. The objectives of media study are vast and there are numerous issues which should be addressed.

To consider the contemporary situation of media in the Middle East, the international workshop with the title of "*Media in the Middle East: Latest Issues*" was held at the Kyoto University on 16th October, 2010. During the workshop, four presenters each gave a presentation and then discussed the contemporary Arab media issues. Since the conference, the situations surrounding the media in the Middle East are believed to have experienced a lot of changes. Although all the papers in this special feature are the contributions of this workshop's attendees, they have continued to expand their ideas since the conference in response to these new developments.

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