

Najmeh Moradiyan Rizi

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2016

<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/3340>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version

Rezension / review

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Rizi, Najmeh Moradiyan: New media configurations and socio-cultural dynamics in Asia and the Arab world. In: *NECSUS. European Journal of Media Studies*, Jg. 5 (2016), Nr. 1, S. 283–288. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/3340>.

Erstmalig hier erschienen / Initial publication here:

<https://www.necsus-ejms.org/test/new-media-configurations-socio-cultural-dynamics-asia-arab-world/>

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New media configurations and socio-cultural dynamics in Asia and the Arab world

NECSUS 5 (1), 2016: 283–288

URL: <https://necsus-ejms.org/new-media-configurations-socio-cultural-dynamics-asia-arab-world>

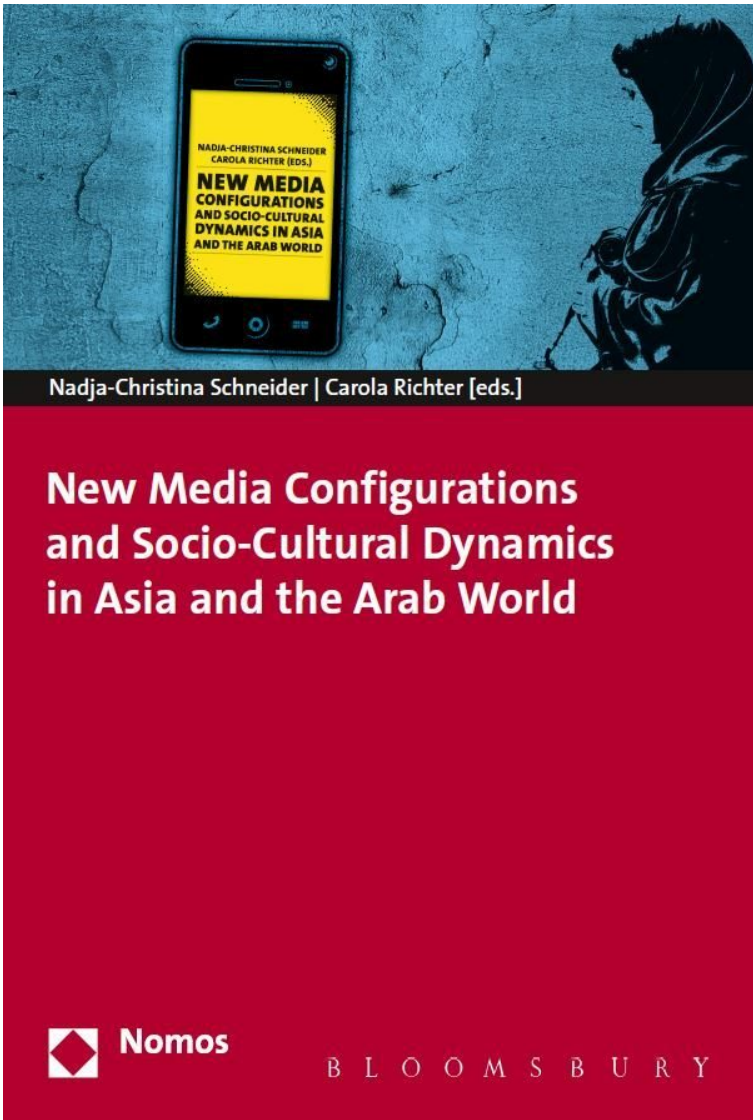
Keywords: Arab, Asia, book review, new media

Today more than ever new media and digital technologies are embedded in everyday life and socio-cultural structures. In fact, the evolving nature of media platforms, the migratory feature of content across various media sites, and the adoption of a participatory culture have tremendously altered the social dynamics not only within the nation-state setting but also in a transnational context. The significance of this networked and digitally-mediated communication necessitates the contextualisation of media practices by scholars and researchers who are interested in the interconnectedness of media configurations and social and political relations. Nadja-Christina Schneider's and Carola Richter's edited volume *New Media Configurations and Socio-Cultural Dynamics in Asia and the Arab World* (Baden: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, 2015) emerged from the interdisciplinary conference *New Media Configurations – Changing Societies? Current Research Perspectives on South Asia, Southeast Asia, the Middle East and North Africa*, held in Berlin from 28-30 November 2013. The book therefore aims to textualise and analyse the emerging media practices and the processes of mediatization within societies in these regions.

A glance at the recent socio-political events in the Middle East such as Iran's Green Movement (2009), the so-called Arab Spring (2010-2012), Syria's Civil War (2011-present), and the displacement of millions of Syrians from their homeland explicitly shows the crucial role of new media configurations that mobilised people and negotiated hierarchical power relations through the engendering of a collective knowledge and a participatory movement. The distinctive aspect of the various contributions is that they point to the major socio-political movements in Asia and the Arab world as regional and/or translocal hallmarks, based on which the authors provide

accounts of the transformation of media landscape, power dynamics, and socio-cultural, political, and aesthetic expressions in countries as diverse as Myanmar, Egypt, Lebanon, United Arab Emirates, Iran, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Tajikistan, India, and the Kashmir region. The book is divided into four major parts, each bringing a new perspective to trans-regional new media practices. These four sections include: The Political Economy of Media, The Multiple Intersections of Religion and Media, Applying the Lens of Mobility to Media and Gender Studies, and Changing Media Practices in a Digital Age.

A salient insight in regard to the changing media landscape discussed by the majority of authors is the convergence of old and new media, where new media technologies enhance or supplement the functionality and influence of old media through interactivity and the flow of content across their platforms. Marwan Kraidy's concept of 'hypermedia space' (p. 319) as an interlocking communicative setting and 'a symbolic field created by interactions between multiple media, from mobile telephones to satellite television' (also deployed in his earlier book *Reality Television and Arab Politics: Contention in Public Life* [2010]) is particularly useful in relation to the convergence of old and new media. In his chapter 'Graffiti, Hypermedia and Heterotopia after the Arab Uprisings: New Media Practices and Configurations', Kraidy argues to understand socio-political expressions and discourses in Beirut's graffiti scene as long-standing communicative practices where myriad ideological, political, sexual, and civic representations create an aesthetic exchange of information in conjunction with socio-political transformations that are related not only to local knowledge but also to a transnational intelligence. For instance, given that during the Arab uprisings Beirut has remained a relatively stable city, the walls of the town have come to resonate with the political struggles of the Arab world elsewhere. As Kraidy writes, 'an abundance of Arab uprisings stencil graffiti, especially but not solely from the ongoing Syrian rebellion, have dotted the walls of Beirut since late 2010' (p. 324). Further, Beirut's graffiti critique or mock the roles of media in the continuous changes of the region and power relations. This media reflexivity becomes more complex through the circulation of graffiti images in online platforms merging spatial and digital sites as well as local and global discourses.



These convergences also come to the fore in the case of cyber-urban activism employed by Chinese Muslims in Malaysia and Indonesia, which Hew Wai Weng discusses in his chapter 'Dakwah 2.0: Digital Dakwah, Street Dakwah and Cyber-Urban Activism among Chinese Muslims in Malaysia and Indonesia'. Underlining the growing tendency of inviting non-Muslim Chinese to Islam in these two countries, Weng utilises various methodological approaches such as participant observation, interviews, and content and

internet research to argue the multiplicity of strategies that (newly-converted) Chinese Muslims use not only to disseminate Islamic messages and invite non-Muslim Chinese into their communities but also to perform Chinese identity within the religious and national contexts of Malaysia and Indonesia. In this regard Chinese Muslims integrate Chinese cultural symbols in their preaching and religious ceremonies and build ‘Chinese-style mosques and halal restaurants’ (p. 202) in conjunction with the extensive use of social media such as YouTube, Facebook, and web sites. Thus, as Weng puts it, ‘Muslim religiosity in Malaysia and Indonesia has not only been negotiated in various physical places (from mosques to shopping malls) but also contested in numerous cyber spaces (from the blogosphere to Facebook)’ (p. 199).

The emerging practices of new media in regard to the socio-cultural and economic contexts also find expression in enactments and discourses of sexuality and gender as means of constructing gender identities within national and transnational settings. Dredge Byung’chu Käng in his chapter ‘Cultivating Demi-Idols: The Queer Convergence of New Media and Korean Dance Performance in Thailand’ focuses on the performative and media aspects of constructing gender identities through K-pop cover dance (‘the replication of choreographed movements, gestures, and timing to a music video’ [p. 289]) among feminine Asian gay men in Thailand to highlight their queerness through connection with a ‘cosmopolitan Asian status’ (p. 287). The socio-cultural issues embedded in the cover dance thus points to the contested national and sexual discourses in Thailand, because the performance combines and reflects queer and Korean influences as non-heteronormative and non-nationalistic phenomena endangering the country’s youth and Thai culture. The enactment of a ‘cosmopolitan’ (Korean-inspired) queer identity finds its way through three different modes of production and circulation, including online video posts, cover dance contests (local and international), and non-competitive participatory cover dance. Here again, the spatial and online platforms mingle together in such a way that blurs the lines of viewer, user, and producer. In this regard the viewers of K-pop cover dance may create their own videos, do mashups, or pay homages to the existing online works. The media technologies thus provide not only a venue for the emergence of a participatory culture but also a site for the interaction of fans, audiences, dance stars, and producers converging production, circulation, and consumption as well as local and transnational settings through dynamic modes of communication.

Gender discourses of new media configurations finds new ground in Almut Woller's chapter 'Conformism in the Emirati Press: The State-Media Discourse on the Workforce Integration of Emirati Women', which centers on the state media construction of gender roles and relations in Emirati society. In recent decades the United Arab Emirates has become a major economic power in the Middle East and among Arab-speaking countries; yet this economic transformation has been highly integrated with the state discourse of nationalisation or '*Emiratisation*' (p. 90), affecting the gender dynamics of the country. Therefore, in order to discuss the direct involvement of the Emirati government in the project of 'economic diversification, pushing sectors such as manufacturing, finance, trade, and tourism' (pp. 89-90) and its ramifications for gender relations in this economic setting, Woller uses meticulous content analysis of an English-language newspaper (*Gulf News*) and an Arabic-language newspaper (*Al-Emarat Al-Youm*), both sponsored by the Emirati state, in combination with critical discourses of political economy and feminist studies to tackle the convoluted issues of race, class, and gender within national, economic, and media contexts of the country. Woller argues that while the privileged status of Emirati citizenship bestows a socio-economic opportunity for Emirati women (over the sheer number of immigrants working in the country) to engage in the UAE job market, the discursive state-run media setting reinforces the constructed female gender roles such as mother, wife, and homemaker in order to assert the significance of women's role in the project of nation building or *Emiratisation*. In fact, Woller recognises 'a question of the compatibility of career on the one hand and domestic and reproductive tasks on the other hand at the same time' (p. 106), which are not critically addressed in the state-run media in favor of a socio-political and economic state's agenda.

New media configurations and digital technologies have dramatically changed the cultural and political dynamics of societies, bringing about emerging forms of production, dissemination, and interaction. They have also blended old and new media platforms, allowing the circulation of content and information that has amplified the media outreach within a global context. The creation of a participatory culture through which users actively engage with media practices and generate networked communities showcases the fact that digital technologies have become inseparable parts of everyday life, civic participation, and political activism. This media entanglement with public and private spheres has produced contested spaces within which various discourses of power relations are being reinforced and

negotiated. While the active users of new media make themselves visible in both online and offline (spatial) environments, intermingling the virtual and actual mobilisation of bodies and voices, their participatory media forms augment states hegemonic control and/or censorship over both media and users.

It is interesting to note that restrictive and totalitarian governments have applied high-tech and digital technologies as well as sophisticated media strategies (such as filtering specific web sites, blocking social media, or monitoring online user activity) in order to regulate or circumscribe the cybersphere and the freedom of mobility and expression associated with it. This surveillance role of governments and media gatekeepers underlines a tension between the interconnectedness of participatory culture and cyber and political hegemony. Moreover, the complex media landscape delineates the exchange of content within and between old and new media platforms in relation to ongoing social transformations. Thus new media configurations can be read as sites of negotiation and regulation, dominance and resistance, emancipation and control, demarcation and convergence. The (trans)formation of power dynamics, the diversification of information, and the multiplication of content across various media are at the center of Schneider's and Richter's edited volume – a timely and engaging anthology that not only sheds light on the implication and application of media in regard to both macro and micro levels of social, cultural, political, and economic contexts, but also offers valuable qualitative methodologies (participant observation, content analysis, interviews, focus groups, questionnaires) for studying regional and trans-regional communication and media practices and discourses.

Najmeh Moradiyan Rizi (University of Kansas)

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