

Conference Report

International Conference of the Arab-German Young Academy of Sciences and Humanities (AGYA): “Media Transitions and Cultural Debates in Arab Societies: Transhistorical Perspectives on the Impact of Communication Technologies”, Tunis, November 24-26, 2017.

The international conference “Media Transitions and Cultural Debates in Arab Societies: Transhistorical Perspectives on the Impact of Communication Technologies” was held at Beït al-Hikma / The Tunisian Academy of Sciences, Letters and Arts in Tunis, from November 24-26, 2017. Its aim was to explore the relation between ‘new media’ and cultural production from a transhistorical perspective (9th-21st century).

The conference was organized by AGYA members Barbara Winckler (Junior Professor for Modern Arabic Literature and Culture, University of Münster), Carola Richter (Professor for International Communication, Freie Universität Berlin) and Bilal Orfali (Associate Professor for Arabic Studies, American University of Beirut), in cooperation with Teresa Pepe (Associate Professor for Arabic Studies at the Institute for Culture Studies and Oriental Languages, University of Oslo), as part of the research activities of the Arab-German Young Academy of Sciences and Humanities (AGYA) / Working Group “Common Heritage & Common Challenges”.

It aimed at filling a gap in the existing scholarship where the impact of ‘new media’, namely the Internet, has been mainly studied in regard to social and political movements and mostly restricted to recent phenomena. Digital media, however, is not the first ‘new media’ to appear in the Arab world. Therefore, the conference aimed at comparing the adoption of Internet technologies in recent times to previous media transitions, such as the one from oral to script culture that took place in the 9th century, the spread of print technologies after several centuries of a flourishing manuscript culture in the 19th century, or the emergence of audio-visual media (radio, TV, photography, film) in the 20th century. The transhistorical perspective has proven useful in the field of media studies in general, but requires further exploration with specifics to the Arab region. Besides, while previous studies have focused on the opportunities provided by Internet technologies for political dissent, the conference organizers were interested in how the emergence and diffusion of different ‘new media’ at different time periods have affected the conditions of cultural production, distribution, and reception and how cultural debates are shaped by the use of different media.

The conference built upon the experiences of an exploratory workshop held in Münster (Germany) in October 2015, where participants explored preliminary ideas for a transhistorical perspective on the relation between ‘new media’ and Arab culture, focusing in particular on literature and ‘writing technologies’ (writing, print, digital; see www.uni-muenster.de/ArabistikIslam/tagungen/workshop_media_transitions.html). In this second phase, the conference organizers aimed at further exploring issues discussed in the previous workshop by including other media (e.g., radio, TV, audio cassettes, photography, film, cultural magazines, paperbacks) and by enlarging the focus to other forms of cultural production, such as music, visual arts, and cinema.

The list of speakers who were invited specifically was complemented by a number of scholars who were chosen from among the roughly 80 submissions received in response to a call for papers. The Tunisian Academy of Sciences, Letters and Arts witnessed the gathering of scholars coming from different academic backgrounds (literary and cultural studies, communication and media studies, history, anthropology, political sciences, library and information science) as well as different countries, like Canada, Egypt, Germany, Great Britain, India, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, the Netherlands, Norway, Tunisia, the UAE and the US. In addition, the conference aimed at reaching out to a wider public beyond the academic sphere by hosting a panel discussion gathering practitioners in the cultural field (film, arts festivals, literary journalism and exhibitions) based in Tunisia, Morocco and the UK. The theme of discussion was: “Media and/in Revolution: New Opportunities and Challenges in Times of Political, Social and Technological Change”.

The conference was built around seven panels, which mirrored the desire to combine a synchronic and a diachronic approach to the question of media and cultural debates. Indeed, three panels assembled scholars interested in a similar time period (the pre-modern period, the Nahḍa, and the digital age), but dealing with different media. The remaining four panels put together scholars dealing with different time periods but interested in similar research questions, such as: the relation between media and the masses, and in contrast media as a platform for the intellectual avant-garde; visual and performative cultures, and the coexistence and complementarity of different media.

The conference was opened by the words of welcome offered by Thouraya Lasram, General Director and General Coordinator of the Scientific Council of the Tunisian Academy. She expressed her gratitude to AGYA for organising this event, and gave some insights on the history of Beït al-Hikma.

The first academic presentation was given by **Hatim El-Hibri (George Mason University)**, whose paper offered some theoretical reflections on the question of media history and culture. El-Hibri pointed out how theorizations of mediation found in disparate fields such as religious studies and the history of technology on the one hand, and debates surrounding mediatization theory on the other might be relevant to understand media historical change in the Arab world. The following two papers, given respectively by **Beatrice Gründler (Freie Universität Berlin)** and **Salim Omri (University of Gabes)**, offered insights on “Oral and Written Transmission in the Premodern Period”. Gründler showed how the book revolution that took place in the Arab world in the 9th century created new relationships and networks of exchange and dissemination and a new spectrum of social behaviors which entailed both novel potentials and risks: Elite individuals would bolster their status by assembling personal libraries, amateurs would gather in bookshops, scholars availed themselves of knowledge they could not access through transmission by reading (or copying) books with or without the knowledge of their authors. More hazardous, book ownership could be used in court proceedings to investigate accusations of heresy. Shifting to a later period, Salim Omri offered a media perspective on the *takhmīs*, a strophic form of poetry, based upon the “gloss” of a precedent text. He discussed how this gloss – considered a cognitive practice of an old interaction ritual found in early oral poetry – was transformed in the Mamluk and Ottoman periods, i.e. in a period characterized by the centrality of manuscript culture.

The second panel dealt with “Media Practices in the Nahda Period”, a period of cultural and social reforms that took place in Egypt and the Levant in the 19th and early 20th century. **Maha AbdelMegeed (Cairo)** focused on Muḥammad al-Muwayliḥī’s journal *Miṣbāḥ al-Sharq* and his serialised narrative of *Ḥadīth ‘Isā Ibn Hishām* to show how the prolonged presence of circulated written material (testimonies, travel narratives, personal accounts), particularly printed material, shaped the conception of narrative truth found in his fictional work. **Barbara Winckler (University of Münster)** discussed the main characteristics of one of the most important ‘new media’ of the time, the *Nahḍah* journal. In an exemplary analysis of selected texts from the women’s journal “al-Mar’a al-Jadīda” (Beirut, 1921-27) she looked at how speeches and cultural events that took place ‘in real life’ were ‘translated’ into a written form to be distributed in print. Instead of debating conflicting ideas which is often emphasized when we talk about the journals of the *Nahḍah* period, she concluded, these texts express another aspect, which is not less important: that of building communities which share common goals and interests. **Teresa Pepe (University of Oslo)** argued that antecedents of the Arabic literary blogs written by young cosmopolitan and tech-savvy authors since 2005 may

be found in the diaries, fictional memoirs and autobiographical novels written by Egyptian young effendi in the 1920s. She focused in particular on the serialized narrative *Yawmiyyāt ‘Arbajī* (Diary of a Carriage-Driver) written by the Egyptian artists and actor Najīb Sulaymān (1893-1955), under the pseudonym “Ḥanafī Abū Maḥmūd”, and published in instalments on the satirical magazine *al-Kashkūl* in 1922. Pepe speculated on the similarities and differences between this text and a number of texts circulating nowadays in the Egyptian blogosphere, arguing that these ancestral genres influenced the way bloggers experiment with the digital technologies to produce literary texts.

These two panels were followed by the keynote lecture given by **Walter Armbrust (University of Oxford)**, whose research interests span across different forms of mass media and popular culture in the Arab world. His talk, entitled “Meandering Through the Magazine: New Media in Interwar Egypt” explored the emergence of the illustrated magazine in interwar Egypt as a “new medium”. Focusing on the close reading of a single issue of the magazine *al-Ithnayn* from the mid-1930s, Armbrust showed how the new medium necessitated novel reading practices. He argued that such concepts as flow, remediation and hypertextuality, attributed often to television and the Internet, help us to understand the cultural and sensory impact of this earlier medium, and particularly its key position between audiocentric and ocularcentric reading cultures.

On the following day, the conference opened with a panel that continued the discussion on “Media for the Masses”, initiated the day before by Armbrust’s lecture. **Ziad Fahmy (Cornell University)** suggested the term “media-capitalism” to replace Benedict Anderson’s framing of print culture and “print-capitalism” as the primary factor in creating a “new form of imagined community”. In the context of Egypt at the turn of 20th century, where literacy was low and texts were often read aloud, mass media including print, performance, recording, and broadcast media, allowed everyone regardless of class, education or literacy level to aurally and visually participate in the nationalist project. On these theoretical premises, Fahmy introduced his research project on the history of the radio in Egypt. Resting on the aurally, **Andrew Simon (Dartmouth College)** spoke about the cultural debates sparked by audiocassette in the mid-to-late 20th century Egypt. He argued that audiocassette technology de-centralized state-controlled Egyptian media long before the advent of *al-Jazeera* and the Internet, by enabling any citizen to become a cultural producer, as opposed to a mere consumer. In response, many local critics accused those “vulgar” cassettes of poisoning public taste, undermining high culture, and endangering Egyptian society, in an attempt to dictate *who* could create “culture” and *what* constituted “art” during a time of tremendous

change. Shifting to more recent media practice but keeping the focus on the “masses”, **Ines Braune (University of Marburg)** analyzed *parkour* in Morocco as a contemporary mediatized cultural practice shaped by “traditional” as well as digital materialities. With the help of *parkour* she illustrated how better access to (Internet) technology empowers young people to participate in a global subculture as well as give them the right to represent themselves by themselves. At the same time, *parkour* highlights hierarchies and inequalities at the intersections between the street and the online sphere.

The following panel dealt with the opposite question, which is “Cultural Debates and the Avantgarde”. All the three papers were based on case studies from Lebanon. **Yvonne Albers (University of Marburg)** spoke about the launch of the Beirut-based periodical *Mawāqif* by the Syrian poet Adonis and other well-known writers and artists, in spring 1968. Her paper discussed the strategies through which *Mawāqif* entered the literary field in the moment of 1967 and how it staged its novel project – reclaiming the mandate of the intellectual and re-defining criticism and the social role of literature – while responding to the conventions of the journal as a genre, thus demonstrating the close link between media change and changes in cultural debates. **Monique Bellan (Orient Institute Beirut)** looked at art exhibitions as a medium to engage the public in debates about art and beyond. She spoke more specifically about the Contact Art Gallery, founded in the early 1970s in Beirut, and its unconventional, but short-lived publication that went far beyond a simple exhibition catalogue. The paper discussed the role of galleries in shaping the aesthetic landscape in face of the absence of aesthetic authorities and an emerging “art system”. **Diana al-Richani (University of Ottawa)** discussed opportunities provided to new cultural actors by online platforms, such as Soundcloud that favor the emergence of new forms of Arabic music (usually tagged on Soundcloud with hashtags like Electro Tarab, Tarab Dub), allowing amateur musicians and those who exist on the peripheries of the music market to connect and collaborate with artists who share similar tastes and visions.

The fifth panel enlarged the focus on the digital revolution introduced by al-Richani’s paper, by dealing with “Arab Culture and Web 2.0”. **Marie-Thérèse Abdel-Messih (Kuwait University)** illustrated the use of both creative writing and new media by the contemporary Egyptian writers and/or creators Ahmed Shafie (b. 1977) and Hassan Khan (b. 1975). She argued that their art-work involve different media platforms and challenge established perceptions about stable (territorial or global) sites, subjectivities and the illusion of fixity. **Amal Hassan (Lebanese University)**, who works as a librarian, presented her research on “Arabic Literary Books in Digital Libraries’ Websites: Availability and Use”, dealing with

full-text Arabic literary books previously printed on paper and made available over the Internet by anonymous users. Her research combined an analysis of eleven open and free websites that allow the download of Arabic literary books, and interviews to a random sample of Lebanese participants concerning their reading practice on the Internet. While these websites offer a significant number of scanned books and disregard issues of copyrights, the interviews show that there is still low awareness of this availability among Arab digital users. Shifting from online libraries to blogs, **Mujtaba Isani (University of Münster)** presented preliminary insights from his research on the impact of the Arab blogosphere on cultural debates. He argued that while there is little misgiving that the influence of blogging keeps increasing among the cultural elite, their reach compared to old forms of print and electronic media still remains questioned within the Arab world. He aims at researching further this question by comparing the impact of blogs to newspapers, using methods from quantitative research.

The second day of the conference ended with a panel discussion that gathered four practitioners from the Arab cultural field: **Samuel Shimon (London)**, writer and editor of *Banipal: Magazine of Modern Arab Literature* and the former literary website and now print magazine *Kikah* (in Arabic); **Ayoub El Mouzaine (Fes)**, blogger, translator, exhibition curator and contributor to the Lebanese online magazine *al-Mudun*; **Meriam Mechti (Tunis)**, journalist, feminist activist and founder of the feminist arts festival *chouftouhunna* in Tunis; **Abdelhak Tarchouni (Tunis)**, former journalist and independent documentary filmmaker. The discussion was chaired by **Carola Richter (Freie Universität Berlin)**. The participants discussed how technological in connection with political changes brought about new opportunities for discussion and articulation in the public sphere but also new challenges. Meriam Mechti explained how after 2011 women felt empowered to show their interests and expectations and the *chouftouhunna* festival became for them an ideal place to share these ideas and articulate them in an innovative artistic way. Similarly, Abdelhak Tarchouni emphasized that the political change in Tunisia offered him and many others opportunities to deal with topics that had been taboo previously and to approach them artistically such as in films. All of the participants stressed that the Internet and social media allowed for a greater (transnational) visibility of artists and the possibilities of interactivity and networking. However, Ayoub El Mouzaine also referred to the trend of image cultivation of Moroccan writers through social media which might harm an exchange of ideas. Samuel Shimon admitted that he eventually closed the *Kikah* website and turned it into a print magazine for world literature because the digital content was easily published on other websites without

acknowledging authors' rights.

The last day of this conference started with a panel discussing the relation between media and “Visual and Performative Cultures”. **Ammeke Kateman (University of Amsterdam)** showed how the “*hajj*-selfies”, taken during the annual Islamic pilgrimage and shared on social media, that had caused some uproar in recent years, were not the first instances of *hajj*-photography. She discussed portraits of *hajj*-travel writers and their company published in Arabic Muslim *hajj*-travelogues before the Second World War. By comparing these different photos, she discussed the possible connections between the use of portrait photography in *hajj*-travelogues and an increased focus on the self in religious experience, as well as the new medium's connection to the introduction of new actors with different aims in the religious field. Resting on photography, **Khadeeja Amenda (Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi)** explored the social, cultural and sensorial lives of photographs and its everyday mediations among the Hadrami community of Barkas (on the outskirts of Hyderabad, India). Studying the media object of photograph in the light of in-depth interviews and participant observation among the Hadrami community, Amenda's paper showed how the study of photographs as artefacts bridges the past and present of diasporic communities. **Jan Scholz (Heidelberg University)** contributed to the panel's topic with his analysis of modern preaching manuals from the 20th and 21st centuries, in comparison with an Islamic preaching manual from the 14th century. He showed how these different manuals offered different performative advices, which are still evident in the way contemporary preachers use voice, gestures, facial expressions and body language. As an evidence, he showed YouTube Videos of the preaching performance of the Egyptian Amr Khaled, and reflected on the relation between these performative strategies and the emergence of new communicative technologies. In the last panel on “Cultural Debates and Debate Cultures across Media”, **Omar Al-Ghazzi (London School of Economics and Political Science)** investigated the impact of social media on the imagination and construction of collective memories in the Arab world, by considering how the historic era of Al-Andalus has been discussed and represented on social media in the aftermath of the 2011 Arab uprisings. He examined two case-studies in 2013: an online interactive campaign to promote the history of Al-Andalus, and a web and television series, “The Story of Al-Andalus,” starring the previously mentioned Egyptian television Islamic preacher, Amr Khaled. He argued that despite the differences in interpretation, both cases construe Al-Andalus as an originary time for Arab-Muslim collectivity and inject contemporary political debates with the force of historical nostalgia. **Khawla al-Shuwaihi (Zayed University, UAE)** tackled the question of social media and cultural authority, taking

UAE as an example. She showed how prominent social media users in the sphere of art and literature, such as for instance the Emirati writer Yasser Hareb, influence culture and cultural choices among UAE youth, acting as trend-setters. Keeping the focus on digital media and the Arabian Gulf, **Magdalena Karolak (Zayed University, UAE)** investigated the importance of social media from the point of view of creation and diffusion of popular music in Saudi Arabia. Analyzing music videos such as Hesham Fageeh's "No woman, No drive" (2013) or the recently trending video clip "Hwages" (2016), she argued that social media breaks the monopoly on entertainment by promoting different musical genres and fostering social debate on questions related to the core values of the Saudi society, such as women empowerment.

Overall, the transhistorical perspective and the focus on cultural debates, has proved extremely enriching for the discussion on the impact of media in the Arab world. Notwithstanding the variety of methods and disciplines and corresponding jargons mentioned in the discussions, the participants engaged in fruitful conversations and received constructive feedback on their research projects. In the final discussion, chaired by the organizers, the participants agreed to publish the output of this conference, preferably into an open-access edited volume or journal issue. Last but not least, Beït al-Hikma and the city of Tunis have functioned as an inspiring venue for both academic debates and more informal social gathering. The conference attracted a number of local scholars who actively joined the presenters' discussions and exchanged ideas for further cooperation.

For further information, see <http://agya.info/working-groups/common-heritage-and-common-challenges/media-transitions-and-cultural-debates-in-arab-societies-transhistorical-perspectives-on-the-impact-of-communication-technologies/>.

Teresa Pepe (Oslo), Carola Richter (Berlin), Barbara Winckler (Münster)