

Book Review

The Making of Arab News

Reviewed by Ali Darwish



The Making of Arab News

Noha Mellor

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Never has a media phenomenon attracted so much attention in recent history, in both the academic and professional worlds, as that of Arabic satellite television and more specifically Aljazeera. From the moment Aljazeera aired Bin Laden's tapes in the aftermath of September 11, 2001, there has been a flurry of academic and professional activities seeking to understand this new curious phenomenon and to place it in the context of a region long regarded with suspicion and contempt in many quarters of the West. Several books, articles and research papers have been published about Arabic satellite television, and various inquisitive studies have been undertaken in western universities, by westerners and Arabs alike—researchers in media and communication, political science and cross-cultural anthropology, in the first instance, have looked at the social, political, economic and cultural aspects and impact of Arabic media, particularly Aljazeera. Some of the books that have been published in recent years bear the hallmarks of politically motivated or propaganda-propelled campaigns by outsiders to the language and culture of the Arab region or by starry-eyed insiders, climbers and sycophants, barely scratching the surface of this important phenomenon that is set to change the region forever.

One recent publication that stands out from the crowd is the present book: *The Making of Arab News*, by Noha Mellor. Written by an Arab living in the West, this scholarly book brings a fresh insight into the intricate nature of the Arab media. In the preface, Mellor sets out to explain her motivation for writing the book: "AS A NATIVE ARAB LIVING [emphasis in original] in Europe and working in the field of media—both as a scholar and a journalist—I have had the privilege of being able to access information and publications in both English

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and Arabic.¹ I have deliberately chosen to share this privilege with my readers by consistently presenting the views of Arab scholars and professionals side by side with the views of their western, and particularly American, counterparts” (xi).

Certainly, the book goes beyond sheer juxtaposition of these views to a deeper and more incisive analysis of Arab(ic) news and how it is viewed in the west, dispelling some of the long-held misconceptions in western media and political circles about Arab journalism, and unfortunately (as discussed later) perpetuating a few fallacies about the language and culture. Mellor states again, “[s]crutinizing media coverage in both spheres, although a worthy exercise per se, shows only reactions on the surface but does not go deeper than that” (2).

The book opens with an introduction about the emergence of Aljazeera as an alternative source of news stories in the Arab world, “...challenging American media hegemony” (1), and about global convergence not only in the importation of western music and entertainment genres, “but also in the development of news genre in the Arab media and the development of television journalism, which is said to have been non-existent in the Arab world television” (2).

The book, which consists of an introduction and two parts, explores in *Chapter 1, The Arab Region: Similarities and Differences*, the similarities and differences that exist in the Arab world, shedding light on some important aspects of language, identity and political and civil rights, literacy and policy. Falling back on statistics and information primarily from UNESCO, Mellor paints a grim, realistic picture of the state of affairs not only of journalism but also of the general social and political climate in the Arab region. Mellor concludes this chapter by saying that “despite similarities among Arab states, their efforts to launch mutual cooperation projects, particularly in the media field, have not been successful” (23).

Chapter 2, History of Arab News, gives a thorough and informative account of the beginning, development, function and current status of Arab news. This chapter looks at the news as a unionization tool and form of control. It then examines the role of Arab news agencies and their main function “to assist the government in disseminating its information and controlling the incoming news from foreign sources” (38), concluding that “Arab news agencies fail to provide a rich source of Arab news to Arab media and thereby reduce their dependence on foreign (western) news sources” (45), which perhaps to some degree explains why Arab news relies primarily, and in most situations solely, on foreign news sources. “The amount of foreign news in the Arab media is in fact higher than that in the American media” (43).

Chapter 3, Categorization of the Arab Press: Rugh’s Typology Revisited, reexamines William Rugh’s (2004) typology of Arab news and presents a critique by scholars of this typology, “which stems from western theories of the press”. Mellor then explores agenda-setting issues in the Arab press, confirming that “the indulgence in foreign policy issues is not only deep rooted in the

history of news reporting in the Arab region but also in officials' attitude towards news media" (60). This chapter also looks at Arab newspapers published outside the Arab region in the past three decades, and examines the reasons for this drive, arriving at the conclusion that the "reasons that drove these newspapers abroad—lack of technology, access to information, and censorship—seem to have diminished, as several pan-Arab newspapers are now returning to the Arab world" (63).

In *Chapter 4, News Values*, Mellor examines the values by which the news in the Arab press is selected vis-à-vis western news values. Mellor confirms the dominant view that "the criteria journalists use for selecting the news vary from one culture to another, reflecting various ideological, political, and cultural realities" (75). Regarding news in terms of politics, social responsibility, objectivity, prominence, and newness, Mellor examines news values in the Arab region and the west, particularly in the United States, through these variables, concluding that American journalists tend to see their mission as exposing the truth, whereas this role is rare in Arab news media.

In part two, *Chapter 5, The News Genre* examines the news genre in the Arab media compared to western media. Mellor contends that the development of the news genre in the Arab press was a long, hard process. This short chapter (103-107) very briefly touches on the different types of news genre and sub-genres. In this chapter, the comparison stops there and Arabic news is treated as an isolated phenomenon. Citing Ayalon (1995) and Haeri (2003), Mellor claims that the "new medium demanded new genres of writing: clear and understood by a wider audience. However, the journalistic genres sprang from classical Arabic, which had been used primarily in literary genres addressing the small community of intellectuals..." (105). This flawed argument, which indirectly assumes that the so-called "classical Arabic" lacked clarity and precision, begs the question: What was the role of schools in teaching the so-called "classical Arabic" (as a separate thing; a totally different language that has no connection or bears no resemblance to the "spoken" form) and could all pupils and students who were taught this "variety" of the language understand it in the same way as present-day students learn and understand a totally alien language such as English, for example, so much so that it had no direct impact on their lives or means of communication? A crucial distinction that most people, scholars and laypersons alike, fail to make in their analysis of this phenomenon is that between "al-fus_ha" (الفصحى) and "al-faseeha" (الفصيحة) varieties of standard Arabic; the former being "the most eloquent", pure and perfect (pristine) version of Arabic, which no longer exists, and the latter "an eloquent" version of Arabic, recognizing the elements of "lahn" (لحن) or "foreignness" that have crept into the Arabic language since the Arabs' first contact with other nations, which has been erroneously labelled "classical Arabic" by Orientalists—a label faithfully adopted by Arabs (see Darwish, 2005).

Chapter 6, MSA: The Language of News, continues to explore language issues related to the news. Setting the scene for the discussion that follows here and in

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chapter 7, the chapter opens with a recount of a snippet from the autobiography of Egyptian feminist Leila Ahmed recalling the time she was working in Abu Dhabi, her first (and probably last) encounter with other Arabs from other nationalities and how it suddenly dawned on her that Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) was not her mother tongue and that her mother tongue was Egyptian Arabic. “She finally realized why English and Egyptian Arabic felt closer to her than MSA: they were living languages”. This non sequitur (were the other Arabs speaking MSA?) represents the psychological trap that most so-called educated Arabs find themselves in when it comes to standard Arabic. Their sense of alienation, westernism and the so-called *gentleman’s complex* takes them as far as considering English closer to them than Arabic. Again, this misconception stems from the erroneous definition of “living language”. A living language is a language that is in active function or use, and it would be naive to claim that MSA is not a living language by this definition. For these people, a living language is largely a *spoken* language, a dialect.

Ironically, the late Saudi King Faysal Ibn Abd al-Aziz is reported to have said to the late Egyptian President Gamal Abdul Nassir at an Arab summit sometime in the early seventies that “Egyptian Arabic’ was the closest to standard Arabic in terms of terminology, phraseology and structure. Yet whenever and wherever educated Arabs meet, they complain endlessly and peevishly about their different dialects all in their own local dialects, without the slightest glitch in communication.

The chapter presents a brief account of the development of MSA as a deliberate move on the part of the rulers to standardize the language during the peak of the Islamic Empire. This account relies on Versteegh’s (1997) analysis of such alleged “standardization”. This chapter would have benefited from studies by prominent Arabic language scholars such as Subhi as-Salih, instead of relying on Orientalists and outsiders to account for the various phenomena of the Arabic language that very few people are able to appreciate and for which others do not hesitate to suggest remedies based on their understanding of their own languages. Jaroslav Stetkevych, for example, cited in the present volume and in Darwish (2005), has suggested that “the future of the Arabic language will thus lie not in artificial compromises between the two native linguistic sources of classicism and colloquialism, which *work against each other* [emphasis added], but rather in a straight line of development out of a classical morphology towards a new, largely non-Semitic syntax which will be dictated by the habits of thought rather than the habit of live speech. Only then in possession of a language *by which to think* [emphasis added], will the Arabs be able to overcome the problem of conflicting colloquialism and classicism” (109). Such audacious linguistic imperialism and condescension is not seen anywhere else except in the studies of Arabic by foreigners who can only understand the language through their own. Sadly, such ideas will always find their misguided and starry-eyed enchanted followers in the Arab world.

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Colloquialism has existed alongside “classical” Arabic since the early days of the Arabs, and has never prevented them from “thinking” and from achieving intellectual and scientific greatness to which modern civilization owes a great deal of debt. Certainly, successive imperialist and colonialist powers in the last centuries played a serious role in stunting the natural literacy process of societies of the colonized countries. By imposing their own languages on the local population (for example, the French in Algeria) and/or encouraging the use of the vernacular as a means of upward mobility in society (for example, the British in Egypt), these colonial powers contributed significantly to relegating standard Arabic to a lower status in education and professional life. Today however, thanks to Aljazeera and other Arabic satellite television networks—despite the numerous criticisms one might level at them—the perceived gulf between standard Arabic and the local dialects is diminishing at an unprecedented accelerated rate. It is expected that within the next twenty-five to thirty years, major dialectal differences will have merged into standard Arabic or an “educated” streamlined version already in use in many quarters of inter-Arab interaction.

Chapter 7, Values in Language, provides specific examples of Arabic news with back translations. Back translation follows an arbitrary approach that weakens the point these examples try to illustrate. Arabic expressions that have crept from English through translation in the first place are lost in back translation. For example, the trite Arabic expression (إلى ذلك) (ila tHalika) (literally, “to that”), which is used and overused ad nauseam in Arabic news today, is translated into “About this” (page 131), when in fact it is a direct poor translation of the linking device “to this end”.

More to the point, this chapter completely ignores translation as a critical and defining factor in the development of these styles (see Darwish, 2005, and 2006 in this volume) and the fact that most Arabic news is translated from various foreign news agencies. In chapter 2, the author discusses the role of foreign news agencies from a sociopolitical viewpoint and admits that Arab news media depends on foreign news sources. Yet she fails to make the connection between the increased reliance on these foreign sources and their impact on the style of news language through poor translations. A discussion of active vs. passive voice, attribution, hierarchy of textual representation, tense and deictic, cannot be complete without exploring the influence of translation on these aspects of Arabic news. Most of those who translate the news from foreign sources are journalists who are by all accounts untrained, ill-equipped and unqualified as translators. Low translation standards, and literalization—a misguided notion of literal translation as a means of innovation, modernization and creation of new writing styles in journalism—are adversely contributing to copycat representations, contrary to the claim that “the discovery that there was *a mysterious link missing for a successful thought transfusion from the Western into the Arabic culture became a source of frustration* [emphasis added], particularly for the literary generation active in the first quarter of the present

century, as it was fully committed to innovation. At the same time, it was this generation which put modern Arabic on its present course, which unknowingly defined modern Arabic, and which produced the first firmly rooted and consequential cultural communication with modernity. What enabled all this to happen was the gradual appearance of affinities between Arabic and the modern European family of languages” (Stetkevych, 1970),² certainly through literalization and mimicry.

The final chapter sums up the present volume, arriving at the conclusion that the Arab news media have pushed the limits of freedom and enforced a healthy spirit among media outlets, fostering new journalistic practices.

One striking oddity about this book is that while the author lives in Europe, her analysis of western media focuses solely on American media. British and other European media of equal importance are completely ignored, and the book, it seems, is catering for the academic taste of American scholarship.

The plan and thesis of this book are clear and the information organization follows a logical progression of ideas. It is written in a beautiful and accessible style. Generally, it is hard to find fault with this remarkable book, but its biggest weakness lies in chapters 5, 6 and 7, which in my view could have benefited from further research. But even with these presumed flaws, this book remains an indispensable resource for serious journalists and media researchers. 📖

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NOTES

¹ People living in many parts of the Arab world have the same if not better access to similar sources, thanks to the Internet and global satellite television.

² Source: http://www.adath-shalom.ca/history_of_hebrew.htm.