

Mohamed Zayani and Joe F. Khalil, **The Digital Double Bind: Change and Stasis in the Middle East**, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2024, 320 pp., \$27.95 (paperback).

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In their coauthored book, ***The Digital Double Bind: Change and Stasis in the Middle East***, Mohamed Zayani and Joe F. Khalil, examine the paradoxical dynamics of the digital transformation of media and communication in the Arab Middle East, from its varied infrastructures to media industries, and the social, cultural, and political dimensions of its domestic and regional media landscapes. The book's primary argument is that while digital media technologies have the potential to drive progressive change, they are also utilized by existing power structures to resist or control change, creating a "digital double bind."

Their notion of the digital double bind is inspired by the British anthropologist Gregory Bateson's description of the breakdown that occurs due to contradictory pressures facing individuals and societies who receive opposing messages. The result is something of a "no-win situation." Zayani and Khalil describe the "insoluble complexity" (p. 5) of the new digital world's conflicting promise of progress alongside maintenance of top-down mechanisms of stasis.

Zayani and Khalil emphasize that the digital transformation in the Middle East has been a long time in the making, less a single, ongoing revolution than an incremental process of technological evolution. This "digital turn" is characterized by its incompleteness and unevenness, as the region has not fully transitioned out of the analog broadcast era; too many incumbent distributors and state media still see digital platforms as threats. Despite promises of a digital revolution, the reality is more transitional than transformative, as technologically-driven development intersects with infrastructural, political, economic, and societal dimensions that often shape outcomes and limit potential.

The book is structured around five key themes. It begins by setting the stage with a discussion of the broader context of digital change in the Middle East, highlighting the interplay between global digital trends and local realities. The authors then explore the technological foundations and trajectories of digital transformation, examining the infrastructural, technological, and cultural contours of the region's media spheres.

One of the most compelling sections of the book focuses on the politics of digital transformation. Zayani and Khalil show how digital technologies enable new forms of political expression and contention while also being



used for surveillance and control by authorities that are hostile to new challengers. This duality is a recurring theme throughout the book, illustrating the complex and often contradictory nature of change in the region.

The authors also analyze the political economy of the digital, discussing the emergence of tech economies and the roles of cultural and creative industries. While the overall innovation ecosystem in the region is largely uneven and “deficient” (p. 174), there are a sufficient number of successful start-ups to allow hope for aspiring tech entrepreneurs. One example is the region’s largest music streaming service, Anghami, often dubbed the “Spotify of the Middle East.” This comparison, while highlighting Anghami’s reach, also implicitly underscores the gargantuan scale of global competition regional enterprises face. Thus, the region’s most successful tech companies will likely only ever be regional at best. Most startups are concentrated in the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt, but they often face regulatory challenges that inhibit cross-border investments and operations. Even the limited success stories come with caveats.

The impact of digital technologies on everyday life in the Middle East is undeniable, but it varies significantly across contexts. The authors explore these variations as they are reflected across the region’s infrastructures, states, markets, and publics. Infrastructures include not only physical elements like undersea cables but also the institutions that support them; the quality and efficacy of each varies with socioeconomic differences. Zayani and Khalil highlight the digital divide within the Arab states, noting significant disparities in Internet access and technological advancement. For example, Internet costs can range from 0.5% to 12% of individual income, and while some countries have adopted 5G networks, others still operate on 3G. These disparities underscore the inequitable nature of digital potential in the region.

What makes so much of the digital turn possible is the role of new imaginaries—visions and ideas about how technology can alter society. These imaginaries can lead to specific tools and practices that drive change, but they can also work against change when used with reactionary intentions. For example, these imaginaries can be articulated in neoliberal policies that reflect the encroachment of capitalism or in the way marginalized groups use online tools for advocacy, which conservative elements in society see as threatening. They often pressure the state to act censoriously. Some of political-cultural imaginaries are therefore reactionary, fearing technological shifts. They find expression through moral panics around innovations.

The book concludes with an examination of the cultural implications of digital transformation, on identity, collectivity, and multivocality. The book’s special emphasis on youth is noteworthy. Young people in the region are more public than ever, which only further heightens tension between their desires of self-expression and the imperative of compliance with social values. The emergence of authenticity discourses come out of the contested “cohabitation” of offline celebrities who take to social media in tension with the digital native influencers who lay claim to their territory. The book powerfully shows how the youth embody potential, as they embrace emerging digital subjectivities that suggest progress is inevitable. Perhaps they will offer a way out of the double bind.

One of the book’s strengths is its comprehensiveness. Zayani and Khalil provide a thorough, historically grounded survey of the emerging digital mediasphere in the Middle East, covering a wide range of topics and themes. Their interdisciplinary approach allows the authors to capture the multifaceted nature

of unfolding media and communication developments in the region. The book is written accessibly and would be appropriate for advanced undergraduate courses, ideally students who have had some coursework in economics, political science, science and technology, and Middle East studies, besides introductory media and communication courses. It would also be useful for MA-level courses and above, especially those on media industries, digital cultures, and media and politics.

As for weaknesses in the book, it should be noted that in terms of methods, the book seems to rely exclusively on secondary research and news reports. Another is that the "double bind" as a framework is at times itself too analytically binding. Much of the book's analysis rests on accentuating simultaneous opposites, which can at times seem to force dichotomies on forces that may not be as binary or equal as the framework projects. Still, the double bind framework works well generally to explain why technological promises go unfulfilled and, yet, why statist accounts of digital domination are incomplete.

The authors clearly draw on their rich experience researching, and working in, the region. Every chapter reveals novel interconnections and disjunctures, with a level of nuance that could only be the result of deep authorial familiarity. Mohamed Zayani is a professor of critical theory at Georgetown University in Qatar, where he directs the media and politics program. This book is his fourth on the region's media-politics. Joe F. Khalil is a professor in residence at Northwestern University in Qatar. His research and teaching focus on media industries, production studies, social movements, and digital cultures, with a particular emphasis on Middle East youth. Khalil has extensive professional experience in Arab television production and programming, having worked with major Arab satellite channels such as Orbit, MBC, and CNBC Arabiya.

The Digital Double Bind provides a thorough overview of the digital transformation in the Middle East, highlighting the region's unique challenges and opportunities. This book is a must-read for scholars and practitioners interested in the intersection of technology, politics, and culture in the Global South.