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Laila Shereen Sakr, **Arabic Glitch: Technoculture, Data Bodies, and Archives,** Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2023, 194 pp., $25.00 (paperback).

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On June 15, 2013, a group of young Tunisian hacktivists triumphantly entered the much-despised headquarters of the Tunisian Internet Agency (ATI), which was housed in a three-story villa in the capital's leafy Mahrajène district. Sitting in the villa's basement were the hard drives and servers used to implement the Ben Ali regime's ruthless blocking and censorship policies, which for more than a decade had been used to silence dissent online. Once gaining access to the machines, the activists—including Moez Chekchouk, who later became the chairman and CEO of the ATI, and Slim Amamou, who served as the first secretary for sport and youth in the country's transitional government—renamed the space "404 Lab." It was a direct nod to their victorious campaign to dismantle the regime of blocking and censorship and to usher in a new era of freedom and democracy.

But the name "404 Lab" was no coincidence. Styled on the 404 out-of-service landing page—the common destination for websites once deemed off-limits by the regime—the meme "Ammar 404" had been one of the many creative rallying cries for the motley combination of bloggers, journalists, artists, and students who composed the loosely formed cyberdissident movement at the heart of the Arab uprisings.

Laila Shereen Sakr's book ***Arabic Glitch: Technoculture, Data Bodies, and Archives*** emerges as a shining academic achievement in a decades-long scramble by academics, journalists, and artists to capture some of that creativity and to tell the story of the Arab uprisings as one of rapid technological change, political reactionism, and creative resistance. The book should certainly become an integral part of any future study of the Arab uprisings, and it provides interesting and creative inroads for thinking about the relevance of Arabic Internet culture to more global questions of identity, culture, and security in the age of information.

Sakr's central case study is of Alaa Abd al-Fattah. An early cyberdissident in Egypt, Alaa's brutal detention by the Mubarak and later El-Sisi regimes made him an iconic figure in that country's struggle for democracy. Sakr is right to concentrate on his case, and her analysis of his work and the culture he championed represents—perhaps along with Linda Herrera's (2014) *Revolution in the Age of Social Media*—the most detailed, if not comprehensive, study to date of the Egyptian blogger movement. Across three chapters, Sakr travels from the first blog created by Alaa and his longtime partner Manal Bahey al-Din, "Manal and Alaa's Bit Bucket," to their creation of the first "Linux user group" for Egyptians, where, as Sakr writes, quoting the website, they expressed "a shared 'philosophy of free software, the open-source model, and love of the GNU/Linux system'" (p. 66). It is hard to imagine these as the defiant utterances of heroic revolutionaries, but indeed, as Sakr forcefully argues, that is precisely what they were.

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Across the book—which includes five chapters, each an extended meditation on activism, digital aesthetics, and body politics in the Arab digital sphere—Sakr, who blogged under the handle VJ Um Amel, resists the kind of neat historicizations that would depict the countries of the so-called Arab Spring rising up in blocs against authoritarian regimes whose power was maintained through the butt of a rifle. This is both fitting and ironic. As Sakr explains in the introduction and again in chapter 4, she was summoned to the office of U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton not long after the uprisings began to provide some "predictive analytics" for the situation in Libya. But the tool that had caught the eye of Washington—VJ Um Amel's (read: Sakr's) impressive database of Arab tweets housed on a platform dubbed R-Shief (echoing "Archive")—was built to look back, not forward. As on the Internet, Sakr scrambles her chronology, gliding back and forth from the past to the present and the not-so-present. The author's unsettling style of concrete inexactitude—detailed software references alongside fragmented biographies, self-histories, and half-finished theories of "figuration," "data bodies," and "post-human techno-feminism"—approximates what this reader understood to be the author's description of a "glitch," a pseudo-Derridean instance of *différance* wherein something becomes present, only briefly, before vanishing forever or freezing indefinitely. The glitch also works like a point of digital rupture in Sakr's telling—a fortuitous instance in which the "wiring beneath the technology" becomes visible (p. 21).

Alaa, Manal, and the other bloggers in this book—like the author's own story—flicker in and out of the narrative, giving the book a far more human-centered focus than its title would suggest. These biographical—or even autobiographical—aspects of Sakr's writing set the book apart from more straightforward ethnographies of the Arab blogger movement, such as Mohamed Zayani's (2015) exceptional *Networked Publics and Digital Contention* or Dounia Mahlouly's (2024) indispensable *Digital Political Cultures in the Middle East Since the Arab Uprisings: Online Activism in Egypt, Tunisia, and Lebanon*. The intersplicing of personal memoir with the book's historical analysis of Internet culture and cyber activism also helps set the work apart from other major postuprising works, including Marwan Kraidy's (2017) *The Naked Blogger of Cairo* and Tarek El-Ariss's (2018) *Leaks, Hacks, and Scandals: Arab Culture in the Digital Age*, which share Sakr's fascination with the Internet and the strange new bodily exchanges that Internet culture has ushered in for Arab culture and society. Still, the personal stories of the bloggers at the center of this book tend to glitch. This may be, altruistically, because the author's launching pad for exploring these stories derives from a willingness to allow ideas and problems, rather than a strict chronology, to drive the narrative. In chapter 4, for example, after meeting with Clinton's assistant secretary of state, Rose Gottemoeller, sometime after 2011, we are suddenly back in Cairo sometime before 2011, at the Greek Club near Midan Talaat Harb with bloggers Alaa and Manal and several others, of whose group VJ Um Amel was a part. Floating behind the sequence of information, however, is the question—explored in depth by Herrera and others—as to the extent to which the State Department should bear some responsibility for the bloggers' successes, failures, or experiences in between.

The invariable glossing (or perhaps glitching?) that accompanies the book's engagement with some of these thornier topics creates a kind of material lacuna that Sakr fills—too often at times—with poststructuralist jargon. The author's desire to write theory into this otherwise fascinating ethnography of cyberactivism in Egypt mirrors most closely El-Ariss's (2018) book. But unlike the latter, Sakr is uninterested in rehashing old principles. Rather, the book's theoretical contributions involve a largely new "posthumanist" lexicon. In a way, this presents an elegant twist to the writing because, indeed, what precedent is there for

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describing the relevance of open-source software in Arabic for prodemocracy movements in the Middle East? Or the encoding of the Arabic glyph for web interfaces? Or the visualization of half a million tweets on "#Syria"? Sakr locates a field for the kind of scholarship the book produces—"postcolonial digital humanities"—but rightfully refrains from contextualizing her subjects' place in that field (p. 137). Unlike El-Ariss's (2018) book, it is also more difficult to see how Sakr expands on or challenges some of the cultural theory problems she alludes to, and to that extent, one cannot help but wonder why the rhetorical flair is necessary at all. Nonetheless, stylistics aside, Sakr's book magnificently recenters our attention on the very human, very flawed, but also very inspired actors who, with technology in hand, helped shape the course of modern history. It should be read broadly and with an eye to the past and the future.

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