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Book Review

Science Journalism in the Arab World: The Quest for 'İlm' and Truth

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For years, scholars have extensively studied the landscape of journalism in the Arab world and its practices. While they have largely focused on political reporting, science journalism in the region still remains a less explored territory. Despite the significant role of science in the history and development of Arab societies, what role do science journalists play in the region? What are the key characteristics and contributions of science journalism in the Middle East and North Africa? To address these questions, *Science journalism in the Arab world: The Quest for 'İlm' and Truth* written by Abdullah Alhuntushi and Jairo Lugo-Ocando offers a comprehensive analysis of science journalism in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. This book published in 2023, has ten chapters, spread across 265 pages, and attempts to describe and evaluate the current state of science journalism in the region and its contribution in the development of Arab societies.

Chapter 1 provides an introduction and overview of science journalism in MENA and its importance in promoting science in the region. While discussing the relationship between the region's predominant religion Islam and science, the authors argue that the former has a more positive view towards the latter. Chapter 2 & 3 discuss the history of science journalism in the MENA region and its current state country by country. To understand why Arab journalism operates in a completely different setting, authors examine the historical contexts that paved the way for science journalism in the region. Like many societies in the global south, the MENA region was also impacted by colonialism. Authors argue that the current

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media censorship practices in the region were in fact developed and inspired by this colonial rule. These arguments challenge the common perceptions that countries in the Middle East are oppressors of media freedom while in fact these practices were deeply inspired by British colonialism in the region. When it comes to the nature of the media systems and journalistic practices, it's true that each country in the Middle East has a particular set of characteristics. An analysis of various countries in the Middle East showed that most of them share similar challenges like lack of capabilities, lack of knowledge, limited interest in science by people, government censorship and little access to expert sources. However, the authors didn't specify why countries like Iran, Tunisia, Bahrain and Morocco were left out in this analysis.

Chapter 4 provides an examination of how the region's prevailing news cultures have influenced science reporting as a profession. Authors argue that culture, religion and politics are often identified as the key factors that cause differences in news culture when compared with the West. They also found journalists in MENA are often dependent on official narratives and they rarely question them. This echoes Bahry (2001) who argued that Arab media act as an extension of their ruling governments by giving publicity to the leaders. Due to this distinctive nature, this chapter has stressed the need for the Arab world to have its own analytical category that points to its unique news culture. This is really crucial, as every region has its own distinctive factors that shape its news culture, and one cannot view the Middle East and its journalism practices through a Western news culture lens.

Chapter 5 suggests that professional autonomy in MENA journalism has its limits, because the governments are mostly authoritarian and there is barely any financial backing for the production of critical and challenging news pieces. With limited scope to operate freely, journalists' primary responsibility in the region has switched from evaluating policy to supporting governments. Whereas in chapter 6, authors assess how journalists in the Middle East access and engage with various news sources in their everyday news production. After describing the nature of the relationship between journalists and scientists, the authors highlight that scientists in the Arab region frequently use intermediaries (communication experts from public relations) rather than speaking directly to the journalists. However, they didn't explain why intermediaries are being used in these communications and what role they play. But this could be because lack of relevant education and proper skills make it more difficult for journalists to communicate with their sources. In this situation, communication experts can bridge both people. But as a result, most of the important elements in the works of scientists would be misinterpreted.

There have been various debates about the status and opportunities of women in the Middle East and North Africa. To add into this debate, Chapter 7 focuses on gender, an important element in media studies. It argued that women are present very less in the stream of science journalism and when it comes to finding science related news sources, they face more challenges compared to men who do the same job. This is because women in the region face double vulnerability when it comes to working rights. On the one hand, they face limitations as women and on the other side, they face obstacles if they are non-citizens. However, many countries in the region like Saudi Arabia, are slowly making progress when it comes to women rights.

Chapter 8 discusses how knowledge and expertise of journalists are important to investigate and verify claims based on statistical data in the media. It was found that MENA has a lack of statistics education and it has affected science journalists' ability to understand and engage with numbers. Some of the most important issues faced by science journalists while using statistics are validity, analysis of data and reliability. Arab journalists in specific also face issues that emerge from the political and sociological setting in which science is disseminated. So it is extremely important for the news outlets in the region to provide sufficient training and time for journalists to critically study the data. Chapter 9 argued that Arab people are active consumers of news and they consume news in a way similar but unique at the same time to that of the West. When compared to other regions, the Arab world still consumes less science news. This is largely because the people in the region itself are less interested in STEM. Also, the restriction on the public's access to science information is also an equally important issue. However it is important to note that these restrictions on public access to information apply to all news beats in the region and it has to do with the historical structure of the institutions and the governing regimes.

Chapter 10 concludes the book by reiterating that limited on-the ground capabilities and lack of audience has affected the growth of science journalism in the region rather than limitations enforced by factors like religion, culture and politics. In addition to this, three main factors that undermine science journalism's capacity to provide an arena for science communication are professional autonomy, less interest in science news and insufficient education by the public. Regardless of these issues, this chapter underlines that science journalism deserves more focus as it has the capability to advance society and thereby develop the MENA region.

This book is a valuable addition to the existing literature on science journalism in the Middle East and North Africa. It is very well organised by giving sufficient context first and later thematically arranged chapters that address various aspects that influence science news in the region. One of the strengths of this book is that it challenged the reductionist western approach that Arab legal framework inspired by religion hinders science journalism in the region. By presenting the rich history of the golden age of Islam when Muslims actively contributed to various streams of science, authors reaffirmed that Islam has encouraged truth seeking and does not obstruct science news in the region. Another commendable aspect of this book is its attempt to explore gender specific issues related to science journalism. Such discussions are very rare in the MENA region and the authors have successfully shed light on problems faced by women journalists in particular. They also suggested that, even though gender based disparities are present in certain MENA countries, the nature of these challenges vary significantly across the region. Some countries have even started adopting more progressive gender policies.

Indeed this book has offered a critical study of the complexities and main challenges faced by science journalism in the MENA region. But one important limitation of this book is exclusion of growing areas of focus in modern science reporting. While discussing journalistic genres and news topics covered in the region, authors failed to mention climate change and artificial intelligence (AI). Considering how the MENA is one of the most water-pressed and vulnerable regions for climate change, discussions on how journalists cover it is extremely important. Are there enough climate reporting in the region and do governments support them (journalists)? We are not certain. Another critical issue that wasn't addressed is the rise of AI and how it is impacting science journalists in the region. Many governments in the MENA are investing in AI and it would be interesting to study how journalists are adapting to this new area of focus. Thus future science journalism studies should include climate change, AI, and the problems faced by reporters while covering it.

Moreover, this book observed that countries like Qatar, UAE and Saudi Arabia have have significantly invested in projects related to science and they have programs and institutions that promote science journalism and STEM education in their diversification projects. So it would be interesting to compare how Gulf stand out in the MENA region in future studies.

Overall this book is an informative read for anyone interested in learning about science journalism in the MENA region. It provides very rich insights on the

strengths and flaws of science news in the MENA region which will undoubtedly contribute to the future studies.

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