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Mirage in the desert? Reporting the ‘Arab Spring’

John Mair and Richard Lance Keeble (eds), 2011

Bury St Edmunds, Abramis, 337pp

ISBN 978-1-84549-514-5

Mirage in the desert? Reporting the ‘Arab Spring’, edited by John Mair and Richard Lance Keeble, is a timely, well-structured, informative book. It hosts contributions from Western journalists who covered the events that swept the Arab world in 2010-2011 and led to the overthrow of three Arab presidents/dictators, Ben Ali of Tunisia, Mubarak of Egypt and Gaddafi of Libya.

The book also features contributions from well-known scholars and writers in the field of journalism studies, political communication, war reporting and propaganda. It is cleverly divided into seven sections. It starts with relatively short articles from journalists reporting from the frontline, then moves to question the term ‘Arab Spring’ and the problem with the notion of the ‘tweeting revolutions’. One section looks into the role al Jazeera, the international television network, played in the uprisings and another section to women on the frontline in the Arab revolutions, be it a reporter or activist.

After analysing the way Western media represented Gaddafi, the book ends with reflections on the long-term, political effects of the Arab revolutions. Apart from the section on al Jazeera, the book mainly captures and examines reporting the Arab revolutions in the Western-British mainstream media and Libya is a main focus. The reason might be that the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions took the Western media by surprise (the BBC kept calling the events in Egypt ‘civil unrest’ for the first few days of the revolution), or that the events in Libya were closer to home with the Nato intervention in support of the rebels.

The editors’ decision to question the term ‘Arab Spring’ is important and significant. The authors who contributed on the issue shed light on the historical, political and cultural roots of the term. In the Arab world, the uprising took different names: originally it was the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia, the 25 January Revolution in Egypt, the 17 February Revolution in Libya – and then simply referred to as the Tunis revolution, the Egypt revolution and so on.

The term ‘Damascus Spring’ was first used by late Lebanese journalist Samir Kasir (killed in June 2005). Kasir called for and predicted in his writings a ‘Damascus Spring’ similar to that of Prague Spring in 1968. Speak to journalists from Tunisia, and Egypt and they tell you that they are still in the midst of their revolutions. Defending and protecting the achievements of the uprisings have become the priority for the youth of both countries. For the people of these nations, the ‘spring’ is yet to come.

The journalists whose stories from the battlefield feature in the book do not seem to reflect on how they came to adopt such a term and from where it emerged. Some of the articles read as heroic self-promotions (see the chapter by Stuart Ramsay, chief correspondent of Sky News)

while others appear as fascinating narratives – but with little reflective commentary (see the eye-witness reporting from the Libyan frontline by Oliver Poole, of the *Independent* and *London Evening Standard*).

Comprehensive reflections

Lindsay Hilsum and Alex Crawford (who gained enormous fame for being the first Western journalist to enter Green Square in Tripoli as Gaddafi's regime fell in late August 2011) succeed in their short contributions to highlight some of the problems journalists face while reporting such complex situations. Wrye Davies, BBC Middle East correspondent, and Alan Fisher, senior correspondent of al Jazeera, reflect comprehensively on their institutions' performances during the revolutions.

The chapter by Mashaal Mir, a Danish-Pakistani journalists studying at Kingston University, needs to make a clearer distinction between al Jazeera Arabic and al Jazeera English – and that criticism could also apply to the whole section on al Jazeera. There have been significant differences in the editorial policies of the two channels – largely because their respective target audiences are very different. The Arabic channel follows closely Qatar's foreign policy positions while al Jazeera English seems to adopt a far more flexible news agenda.

David Hayward, of the BBC College of Journalism, challenges the tendency to highlight the similarities between the events in the Arab world and those that took place in Eastern Europe in 1989 – but his writing at times can be over generalised and simplistic (particularly when he is talking of events in Bahrain and Lebanon).

Some of the chapters are excellent starting points for further research: for instance, Simon Cottles's chapter on democratising media and communications, John Jewel's chapter on how the war was communicated in Libya, Alexander Kazamias's on how Edward Said's Orientalism thesis applies to the way Western media reported the 'Arab Spring' and Julie Tomlin's on how Arab women of the revolutions defied the Western stereotypes.

Mirage in the desert? Reporting the 'Arab Spring' is a must read and a good reference book for academics and researchers interested in studying media, communications and journalism. It is also a must read for journalists who report on the Middle East and conflicts in general. It is accessible reading to the general public interested in the Middle East too. Mair and Keeble's book is guaranteed a place on my 'Reporting the Middle East' class reading list.

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