Book Review – *Digital Resistance in the Middle East:*
***New Media Activism in Everyday Life,* by Deborah Wheeler.**
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In her brief new monograph, *Digital Resistance in the Middle East: New Media Activism in Everyday Life* (2017), Deborah Wheeler asserts that the more diffusive the internet becomes throughout the Middle East, the further transformations will occur within fields of citizen agency, conceptions of personal worth and power relations between the people and the state. Most of Wheeler's study relies on a belief that new media diffusion will inherently create a more liberal and empathetic society. As such, Wheeler often references Western notions of fellow feeling, the long revolution and the public sphere in order to support her assertions of the progress of new media. To illustrate these arguments, Wheeler applies Middle Eastern case studies to consistently proclaim that the individual subject is empowered by new media at a discursive level, granting them increasing freedom from state hegemony.

In this discursive conflict, the Middle East represents a battle between dynamic rulers and what Wheeler portrays as a common underclass of the ruled. However, applying this fundamentally generalising structure may misinterpret what much of the Middle Eastern underclass desires from their political leadership. Because her ethnographical work focuses on those willing to talk to her at internet cafes and in classrooms throughout the Middle East, Wheeler may be accessing a distinct population that is already willing to communicate across cultural boundaries. Still, because of the qualitative and quantitative rigor applied throughout the edition, many scholars of new media diffusion will find value in Wheeler's monograph. Meanwhile, scholars of Middle Eastern politics will find a fresh understanding of inter-state and inter-class dynamics and an interesting attempt to map the new contours of rapidly changing public spheres.

Wheeler initially explores how broadening access to new media contributed to separate incidents of resistance within the Middle East from 2004 to 2010. Focusing on the pressures created by fear, need, resistance and revolution in the construction of new media events, Wheeler centres her first chapter upon non-activists, looking at how the common

person uses the internet. She begins with fear, looking at how alarm was stoked to foster a resistance to the establishment of early iterations of the internet during the 1990s. Wheeler explores these fears through fieldwork she performed in Kuwait in 1996 and 1997, where some religious voices trumpeted the idea that all televisions, VCRs and computers should be destroyed in public burnings. Wheeler explains later, through summaries of her fieldwork in Egypt and Jordan from 2000 to 2005, how many of these fears of Western new media declined due to the economic needs of Middle Eastern states.

Chapter two describes the rise of different forms of shared resistance that were necessary to create the Arab Spring through an examination of public perceptions about the internet. The chapter focuses on fieldwork that Wheeler completed while in Egypt, mostly from 2004 to 2013. Compared to earlier research in Egypt of 2000, which often showed deep class concerns and popularly-spread fears of the West regarding internet usage, Wheeler found in her later ethnographical inquiry that increased knowledge of the internet changed public discourse in considerable ways. Wheeler's interviews with internet café users suggest that many of those accessing new media believe that freedom of opinion, employment options, international communications and access to education all increase with internet access. These populations were willing to explore the dangers of Tahrir Square because new media increasingly provided knowledge about corporate corruption, state repression of individuals and the abuse of labourers.

The following chapter looks at Jordan, describing how the broad social coalitions that created minor uprisings in 2011 and 2012 were informed by new media diffusion. From 200 internet café interviews in Jordan in 2004, Wheeler discovers how earlier discursive changes informed later resistance. *Digital Resistance in the Middle East* represents Jordan as a fractured society, one replete with diverse value systems that are held together by a charismatic leader. The expansion of the internet in Jordan was often guided by King Abdullah, who instituted the construction of publicly accessible internet centres called 'Knowledge Stations' in nearly all the villages of his kingdom. These stations, often manned by youths with some allegiance to the monarchy through public sector employment, have been important in expanding labour opportunities and communication for Jordanians throughout the Middle East. Because of this initial royal support for new media, the government was situated to quell significant political resistance through assertions of fresh and modern forms of legitimacy that portrayed Abdullah as a progressive and digitally-engaged guardian of the nation. Wheeler's interviews in Jordan offer that, even with the monarchy's skilful deployment of rhetorical tools, the Jordanian public sphere is yet alive with new media narratives of change, progressively resisting a state where freedom of press

is curtailed, corruption grows, labour rights diminish and both the realities and perceptions of personal freedoms are reduced.

In the fourth chapter, using Kuwait as a case study, Wheeler argues that monarchical leaders, especially those in the Arabian Gulf, will have to accelerate the rhetoric and implementation of reforms to continue to suppress the resistance that arises from increased access to new media. Kuwait enjoys a high level of internet usage, which supports a population that is pushing for reforms in domestic spaces and agitating against larger state politics. However, unlike the charismatic leadership that has heretofore kept Jordan relatively stable, the Sabah monarchy in Kuwait relies on older forms of tradition to perpetuate ideas of legitimacy and, like in Jordan, has resisted exploring spaces of new media that might improve beliefs about the monarchy. Wheeler toured Kuwait in many research trips from 1996 to 2014 and found that an underclass of internet agents, often young and female, is priming for resistance, even as the state continues to construct compliance through a broadly applied rhetoric of deference that defines age as a legitimate symbol of status and moves aggressively against internet activists who speak out against oil corruption, lacking political freedom and harassments of the press.

The penultimate chapter takes a more theoretical turn, exploring the case studies of the edition through structural analysis of the processes that lead to anti-authoritarianism from new media diffusion. These include how various groups operate outside of the state's control in order to disclose corruption in Turkey and Egypt, expand interpersonal diplomacy between Israel and Iran and create social webs to support Saudi Arabian female drivers. The last chapter offers a reading of the emergence of individual risk-taking that developed due to new media after the rise of repression in Egypt, Jordan and Kuwait. Here, Wheeler acknowledges the fears of the cyber-pessimists, detailing how state actors make new media engagement increasingly risky through employing corporate hackers to ferret out activism, torture many of those captured and murder those deemed threatening to state legitimacy.

Wheeler concludes with her constant assertion that new media diffusion liberalises Middle Eastern discourse. Still, because she defines battles over internet usage in structural terms, whereby the state is attempting to control a rebellious underclass, Wheeler may be circumventing discussions regarding elements of an underclass in many Middle Eastern nations that is not so simply insubordinate, but often desires autocracy, not least as a means to attack and critique the West due to the historical allocation of puppet leaders and the perceived decadence of Western culture. The pessimism from many analysts of the Middle East, which Wheeler often derides, does not solely rely on whether the state will be able to repress resistance from new media sources. Rather, cynicism also proceeds from the

contention that the liberalising publics which Wheeler finds in her analyses may not be the singular or dominant voice of the Middle Eastern underclass. Only intermittently does Wheeler reveal how contrasting pressures of autocracy, misogyny, Islamism and hate emerge from the very underclass that also contributes to the intensification of new media democratisation analysed throughout *Digital Resistance in the Middle East*.

Andrew Kettler is currently serving as Early American History Fellow at University College at the University of Toronto. His upcoming monograph, *Odor and Power in the Americas*, focuses on the importance of an aromatic subaltern class consciousness in the making of Atlantic era resistance to the racialised olfactory discourses of slave masters.