

Book Review

Mohamed Zayani & Joe F. Khalil (2024). *The Digital Double Bind: Change and Stasis in the Middle East*. Oxford University Press

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This book presents the world of digital transformation in the Middle East, incorporating the “digital double bind” as an analytical tool which relates to the economy, politics, and society through a socio-political and historical lens.

The basic assertion is that information and communication technologies (ICT) are instrumental in developing global network communities, which are often associated with technologically advanced nations in the West. These communities significantly impact the world’s political, economic, and social landscape. Despite the widespread adoption of digital technology, the Middle East has yet to create a cohesive and effective network community, largely due to social relations, cultural norms and governance systems that have hindered their ability to connect and kept them entrenched in traditional ways. In this case, accurately predicting Middle East’s digital transformation can be challenging. The lack of consistency and linear, systematic progression in this region is a complex and multi-layered process fraught with conflicts and contradictions. Therefore, the reliance on normative criteria and Western paradigms is not feasible. Traditional approaches also run the risk of oversimplifying the digital world or imposing Western ideals onto the Middle East.

Furthermore, factors such as unequal access to digital resources and limited availability of digital literature exacerbate asymmetrical techno-cultural geographies, which are often overlooked. Yet, these factors also significantly contribute to the challenge of accurately predicting the digital transformation in the region. The COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted the significant disparities in access to digital resources, underscoring the need for technological advancements and improvements. While digital technology has brought substantial benefits, its complex and sometimes conflicting dynamics also require careful consideration, even if widely embraced.

The central concept of the book, the double bind, which is posited in social psychology arises when contradictory messages are communicated, leading to an impossible situation for the receiver. This phenomenon can be regarded as inevitable despite the possibility of change if the relational patterns were altered. The authors claim that digital double bind can act as an analytical tool to evaluate the fundamental elements of the technological paradigm and organisational structure of the network society. To do this, it is crucial to acknowledge that the Global North is simply one operational model among several others. Through comprehensive examinations of technology and transformation in the Middle East and the Global South, and by potentially facilitating the development of techno-cultural geographies of the Global North, it can unearth more and bring out different/alternative faces of the digital paradox.

The book is comprised of five parts and a total of 14 chapters. Rather than beginning with an introduction to provide an overview of the basic concepts and flow, the first part of the book introduces the concept

of the “digital double bind” – the book’s title – and its contextualisation within the recent history of digitalisation in the Middle East (Chapter 1). The authors emphasise the importance of evaluating change by considering the unique conditions of the Global South and avoiding the prescriptions of orientalist or the lens of the West. (Chapter 2)

The second part of the book, incorporating knowledge from infrastructure studies, uncovers the distinctive characteristics of the digital Middle East, which is influenced by the physical implementation of technologies and associated procedures with a “multidimensional perspective.” It emphasises the interdependence of infrastructural frameworks with societal, political, and economic structures.

Country-specific examples are provided on digital infrastructure and ecosystem adoption and how actors, structures, and processes influence the deployment of ICTs in the region. This results in different geographies of ICT infrastructure that can either facilitate or hinder digital capabilities (Chapter 3). The authors perform a comprehensive and critical evaluation of the digital development levels of the countries in the region. This evaluation has been based on international statistics and a typology of national strategies -three types of national strategies are categorised according to the political stability and advancement level of countries- and sheds light on the multilayered structure of digitalisation in the region. The conflicting interests and the tension between centralisation and decentralisation complicate the development and implementation of these strategies. Nonetheless, these strategy documents serve to establish policies, governance, investments, and public awareness concerning digital transformation (Chapter 4).

Continuously, an overall assessment of the second part is presented. Factors such as economics, politics, demographics, society, and geography impact the region’s digital infrastructure. The stability of political regimes and wealth affect internet penetration and digital adoption. Low internet penetration, unreliable e-government and e-commerce, and limited digital development funding have also hindered progress. Even countries with better conditions may face challenges in the future. By controlling and funding digital infrastructure, governments may limit the public sphere, curtail civil society, and quell dissenting voices, but there is still a significant gap in access, skills, and relevance. Digital infrastructure is not neutral and can restrict certain advancements. The relational aspects of digital foundation should be evaluated to comprehend the complexities of infrastructure beyond physical objects and organisational frameworks. Chapter 5).

The third part assesses expressions and suppression in public discourse in the shadow of the digital turn. The rise of digital technology has provided Middle Eastern communities worldwide with new opportunities to express their unique social, cultural, and political identities. However, for diasporic communities, reconciling their original nationality with their adopted one continues to pose a challenge. Similarly, virtual communities often face censorship and other restrictions. Despite the potential of digital citizenship, it remains constrained by existing hierarchies and limitations, which hinder access and participation. While social media has given rise to new political and opinion leaders, they are subject to evolving regulations and commercial interests. This has given rise to the concept of trans-local subjectivities, which recognise the emotional ties that people have with their home countries and the need for political recognition and inclusion Chapter 6).

On the other hand, the digital turn has paved the way for underrepresented groups to engage in activism and regain their voices. The events of 2011 are a striking illustration of how digital resources can be utilised to communicate and coordinate social causes. Nonetheless, governments have also harnessed their digital capabilities to conduct surveillance and propagate disinformation. The digital sphere provides an arena for everyday politics, where individuals can assert their agency Chapter 7).

Governments are embracing social media to connect with citizens and offer convenient online services. However, the effect of these e-government initiatives on governance remains uncertain. While such efforts

88 can enhance service delivery, challenges surrounding privacy and legal frameworks may undermine
89 trust and foster monitoring and control. In Gulf nations, sophisticated surveillance technology has been
90 implemented to bolster security, yet the rise of global digital platforms has diminished national sovereignty
91 (Chapter 8).

92 The fourth part provides an analysis of the political economy of the digital landscape, including the
93 trends, practices, policies, and processes that influence it. Particularly, it focuses on the sectors and
94 initiatives where it is taking root through historical patterns in the Middle East.

95 Many Middle Eastern nations are turning to e-governance to manage their socio-economic problems.
96 However, this approach encounters significant hurdles, such as inadequate ICT infrastructure, limited
97 internet access, and inefficient/non-optimal bureaucratic practices. Although e-government projects can
98 enable citizens to engage in public consultation, they may not necessarily encourage e-citizen engagement
99 or promote genuinely improved governance. While digitisation can enhance workforce skills, it also
100 entails inevitable trade-offs, such as the potential to limit lifetime employment, which is a crucial element
101 of the Gulf region's governing system. (Chapter 9)

102 Since the digital turn, the cultural industry spans traditional and digital media. Examining the his-
103 tory, strategies, and transformations of digital cultural industries can provide valuable insights into the
104 key players of the knowledge economy. Telecommunication companies face several challenges, such
105 as inequitable monetisation, deficient regulation, and unequal digital access in different regions. The
106 emergence of non-traditional content has created complexities for traditional media, and digital natives
107 have a better chance of profiting from producing such content, with purchases now being made through
108 apps (Chapter 10).

109 While the Middle East is often described as “the next Silicon Valley,” the digital economy in the region
110 is still in its early stages, characterised by complexity and uncertainty. The development of the digital
111 economy is marked by inherent contradictions, with the Internet of Things, Artificial Intelligence, and
112 cloud computing playing an influential role. Temporal and spatial factors shape the pace and trajectory of
113 the region's digital transformation Chapter 11).

114 The fifth part explores how social media affects the self, how it is mediated and recreated on social
115 networks, and how the digital transformation has reconfigured different sociocultural practices. Using
116 mobile devices in the region to capture, disseminate and amplify “expressions of citizenship,” protestors
117 imbue the concept of citizenship with a deeply personal resonance. It is not the technology that unites
118 individuals but rather the shared yearning for solidarity and the embodiment of emotional citizenship
119 (Chapter 12).

120 Within Middle Eastern societies, decision-making processes are predominantly controlled by older
121 men, resulting in an insufficient representation of others. To uphold societal norms, efforts have been
122 made to censor and regulate ICTs. However, such methods are rooted in traditional beliefs regarding
123 the role and status of these demographic categories and may not always be effective in the digital era.
124 The advent of novel media practices and communication approaches has challenged certain sociocultural
125 norms (Chapter 13).

126 The advent of the digital age has been viewed as a means of introducing Western culture to under-
127 privileged populations in the Global South. However, this approach fails to consider the complex power
128 dynamics that exist along gender, race, and class. While digital empowerment aims to promote equality,
129 it can also result in the infringement of children's rights and surveillance of the youth. Although Middle
130 Eastern communities are redefining their relationships with established power structures, they have yet
131 to be recognised as a political force. As a result, there is a missed opportunity to fully comprehend the
132 potential outcomes of the digital transformation (Chapter 14).

133 Within the context of all the arguments of the book briefly summarized above, a general evaluation
134 is in order: Islamoğlu (2012) suggests moving beyond the outdated practice of dividing world history
135 into domination/subordination, East/West, and centre/periphery categories. By doing so, the important
136 role that human and societal agencies play in different parts of the world can be better assessed and
137 appreciated. The survival of non-European formations can be credited to the adeptness of states and
138 other actors in implementing targeted institutional solutions based on societal relations within respective
139 regions and globally.

140 While the authors emphasise examining the Global South as having a value in itself, (Part 1), the
141 bifurcated distinctions such as Global North/Global South, West/(Middle) East, and the centre/periphery
142 (Parts 2, 3) are preserved throughout the book. Thus, the book rhetorically reproduces the “digital double
143 bind” in the context of these outdated categories.

144 When considering state-citizen relations, the authors emphasise the potential opportunity of e-
145 government to reduce bureaucracy and administrative costs (Part 4). However, the e-government literature
146 presents that the digital gaps may result in additional costs and bureaucratic workloads and a well-
147 structured e-government system is not a magic wand that always creates advantages for all social groups.
148 Given the asymmetrical techno-cultural geographies in the Middle East, the pervasiveness of e-government
149 services may cause un(der)estimated administrative burdens and costs.

150 The authors align with Heidegger in evaluating the transmission of information, place, and togetherness
151 matters (Part 5) among the oppositional arguments presented by Heidegger and Meyrowitz (Coyne, 1995).
152 In this regard, human communication is more than exchanging information. The construction that is
153 “information” comes later as an ontic understanding of the phenomenon. Simply focusing on information
154 overlooks the vital role that context plays in shaping shared experiences.

155 As a conclusion, the book is useful to public administration academics and professionals since it
156 successfully analyses not only how digital double bind is confirmed or challenged but also what makes it
157 a defining feature of the digital age in the Middle East through a socio-political and historical lens.

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