BOOK REVIEW

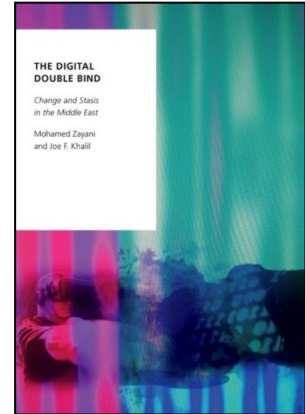## DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST: INSIGHTS FROM *THE DIGITAL DOUBLE BIND*

Azira Azlin Shaharuddin, Munirah Ilias

Authors: Mohamed Zayani and Joe F. Khalil
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Introduction

The Middle East is experiencing a multifaceted digital transformation driven by advancements in information and communication technologies (ICTs). These changes are reshaping the socio-economic landscape of the region as governments, industries, and individuals integrate digital tools into everyday practices. However, this transformation is neither uniform nor devoid of contradictions. In *The Digital Double Bind*, Mohamed Zayani and Joe F. Khalil explore how the region navigates the opportunities and challenges of digitalization, particularly as it seeks to align itself with the global knowledge economy. Through a nuanced analysis, the book examines the interplay of modernization, socio-cultural dynamics, and economic imperatives, highlighting the tensions inherent in this digital transition.

Digital Advancements in the Middle East

The Middle East has embraced the digital age in transformative ways, with governments and private sectors driving forward technological innovation. Smart city projects, such as Saudi Arabia's Neom and Dubai's Smart City initiatives, epitomize the region's ambition to establish itself as a global leader in high-tech urban development. Meanwhile, large-scale investments in digital infrastructure, such as Egypt's Red2Med submarine cable project, underscore the commitment to building robust communication networks that connect the region to the global digital economy.

In addition to infrastructure, digitization has permeated government services. Initiatives like the UAE's "One Million Arab Coders" program demonstrate a strategic focus on equipping the youth with skills necessary for the knowledge economy. Similarly, e-government platforms aim to streamline bureaucratic processes, enhance transparency, and reduce inefficiencies, signaling a commitment to modernization. The rise of homegrown startups, such as Careem and Anghami, showcases the potential for digital entrepreneurship. These companies have not only achieved regional success but also gained global recognition, highlighting the creative and innovative potential within the Middle East.

The Double Bind of Digital Transformation

The Middle East faces what Zayani and Khalil describe as a "digital double bind," despite the promise of digital transformation, this concept encapsulates the simultaneous embrace of and struggle with the disruptive potential of digital technologies. Governments, for instance, promote digital transformation as a cornerstone of modernization while maintaining strict control over digital freedoms. Social media platforms and virtual private networks (VPNs) are often banned or heavily regulated, reflecting a tension between fostering innovation and preserving authoritarian control.

Culturally, the region grapples with the friction between tradition and modernity. Digital platforms foster individualism and self-expression, which often clash with collective identities rooted in modesty and restraint. This dynamic is particularly evident on social media, where influencers navigate between self-promotion and societal expectations. Economically, while the Gulf countries lead in digital readiness and infrastructure development, other parts of the region, such as Yemen and Sudan, remain marginalized, struggling with limited access to digital resources. This digital divide exacerbates existing socio-economic disparities and highlights the uneven nature of the digital transformation.

As the Middle East strives to reposition itself within the global knowledge economy, digital technologies have emerged as both a tool and a challenge. Many oil-dependent economies in the region are leveraging ICTs to diversify their revenue streams and build sustainable economic models. Governments are investing heavily in education and workforce development, focusing on equipping younger generations with digital literacy and skills for emerging industries. Youth, who constitute a significant demographic, play a dual role as beneficiaries and drivers of this transformation.

The creative and cultural industries also present significant opportunities for economic diversification. Digital platforms have enabled new forms of content creation and cultural production, redefining the region's artistic and media landscapes. From individual creators to digital media startups, the creative economy is becoming an increasingly vital part of the Middle East's knowledge economy. However, achieving a robust and sustainable knowledge economy requires addressing systemic challenges, such as bureaucratic inefficiencies and rigid socio-political structures.

While the Middle East's digital transformation holds immense potential, it is constrained by a range of challenges. Authoritarianism remains a significant obstacle, as governments leverage ICTs not only for governance but also for surveillance and control. This undermines the potential of digital technologies to empower citizens and promote democratic engagement. Furthermore, the digital divide persists, with access to technology and infrastructure varying widely across the region. Marginalized communities, particularly in conflict-affected areas, are often excluded from the benefits of digitalization.

Economic and political challenges also slow down digital transformation. Clientelism in economic systems and geopolitical instability hinder international collaboration and investment. Furthermore, outdated regulations often fail to keep up with the fast development of digital technologies, limiting innovation and entrepreneurship in some sectors.

The region's response to the rapid advancements in ICTs reflects a mix of adaptation, resistance, and innovation. Governments are implementing policies to regulate digital platforms while simultaneously encouraging the growth of digital industries such as e-commerce and fintech. Grassroots digital activism is also on the rise, with social media serving as a critical tool for political mobilization and social change, even as authorities attempt to curb its influence. Partnerships with global technology companies and international organizations are playing a pivotal role in shaping the digital landscape, providing resources and expertise to local stakeholders.

Conclusion

The Middle East's digital transformation is a complex process shaped by its aspirations for modernization and the realities of entrenched socio-economic and political structures. *The Digital Double Bind* provides a framework for understanding the tensions and contradictions that characterize this journey. While Middle East has made significant strides in adopting digital technologies, realizing their full potential requires addressing systemic challenges and ensuring equitable access to digital resources. Ultimately, the region's engagement with the digital age reflects its broader struggle to balance tradition and modernity, openness and control, and progress and stasis. This report underscores the need for nuanced approaches to navigate these complexities and harness the transformative power of the digital for inclusive and sustainable development.