
H-France Review Vol. 20 (September 2020), No. 160

Arthur Asseraf, *Electric News in Colonial Algeria*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2019. vii + 223 pp. Maps, figures, bibliography, and index. \$80.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN: 9-78-0198844044.

Review by Rebecca Scales, Rochester Institute of Technology.

It is only in the past fifteen years that scholars of imperialism have begun to devote serious attention to communications and mass media in colonial societies, and much of the scholarship on this topic has come from historians of the British Empire. Arthur Asseraf's *Electric News in Colonial Algeria*, a creatively conceived study of news circulation in Algeria from the late nineteenth century through the Second World War, is thus an important contribution to our understanding of the ways that media shaped social relations and politics in France's largest colony of European settlement. As Asseraf proposes in his introduction, news might best be defined as information that was "interesting, factual, or recent," but Europeans and Algerians did not always agree on what constituted news. Moreover, the arrival of modern communications media—from the newspaper and telegraph to the radio and cinema—did not necessarily supplant preexisting networks for distributing information. Instead, "new forms of media piled onto existing ones, generating more intense and complex news" that proved to be "electric both technologically and socially" (p. 9). Under settler colonialism, Asseraf argues, Algerians became simultaneously more connected and more divided, as the increased pace and circulation of news contributed to social and political polarization.

Electric News uses a loose chronology of thematic chapters to trace the spatial and temporal circulation of news originating outside of Algeria across the colony, a structure that reinforces Asseraf's central argument about the coexistence and mutual intersection of media genres. When the French arrived in Algeria in 1830, they embraced printing as a tool of Enlightenment that would free the local population from superstition and fanaticism. "The fact that Algeria did not have a printing press was seen as proof of its backwardness," Asseraf writes, and "thus, many Frenchmen believed that if they printed, civilization would come" (p. 28). European settlers and the French administration printed some Arabic newspapers, but Algerians continued to rely principally on other sources for news. In contrast, the French-language press grew exponentially alongside the European settler population, outstripping in density the newspaper market of metropolitan France. By the 1880s, French-educated Algerian men began reading and translating French newspapers for other men who patronized cafes, ensuring that the French press was heard even if it was not read. The colonial state, in turn, blamed the increasingly polarized French-language press for exacerbating intra-European tensions and even for inciting violence against settlers.

Chapter one offers a rereading of two 1881 laws that consolidated the republican regime and established a fundamental difference between Europeans and Algerians in the eyes of the colonial state. French authorities used newly instituted *indigénat* to criminalize political speech by Algerians, but considered freedom of the press to be a sacrosanct right of French citizens. While the July 29 freedom of the press law “distinguished between newspapers printed by citizens and those printed by non-citizens,” Asseraf suggests, in Algeria the law was sometimes interpreted as “distinction between newspapers for Europeans and newspapers for Muslims,” leaving “open a space for Muslim activists to use the original 1881 law to campaign for their own civil rights” (p. 47). In the interwar decades, colonial authorities became worried about Arabic-language newspapers imported from abroad, placing readers (particularly in cafes) under increased surveillance. The French parliament also passed legislation allowing the colonial state to ban “foreign language” newspapers, and thus to suppress Arabic publications. In the meantime, Algerians continued to consume news from French publications not expressly intended for them, as well as other media sources.

Chapter two examines the relationship between the telegraph and Pan-Islamism at the turn of the century. Partly to avoid British dominance of global telegraph communications, the French government laid its own cables to Algeria in the 1870s, creating a “density of underwater connections” that gave “material meaning to the belief that Algeria was part of France,” for no other colony enjoyed such close wired connections to the metropole (p. 71). But the telegraph soon began carrying news of events that allowed Algerians to imagine themselves as part of a larger “Muslim world,” as evidenced in an 1897 “disturbance” in the Kabyle village of Rébeval, where Algerians celebrated the recent Ottoman victory in the Greek-Turkish War. Building on the work of Cemil Aydin that explored the construction of the “Muslim world,” Asseraf argues that news from the Middle East allowed Algerians to sympathize with Muslims facing expanding European imperialism. French legislation had created “Muslim” as a racialized category of colonial subjects, but for Algerians, the term acquired “far more positive meanings because it gave a much broader global meaning to Algerian problems” (p. 91). This interest in “Muslim” affairs outside of Algeria propelled the creation of a French-language Muslim press that recontextualized news (often quite dated by French standards) by reframing and highlighting its specific relevance for Muslims. Well into the twentieth century, Asseraf argues, Algerian political activists would continue to mobilize around the term “Muslim” rather than “Arab.” Yet the French administration, paranoid about Ottoman Pan-Islamic propaganda infiltrating North Africa, continued to portray “Muslim empathy as a sign of unwillingness to join the (European) networks of the modern world,” rather than the product of a technology they had introduced into Algeria (p. 82).

The varied news genres—from prophetic manuscripts to rumors and songs—that circulated during the First World War form the subject of chapter three, one of the most interesting chapters of the book. Colonialism established racial difference through a temporal framework, as Johannes Fabien, Michael Adas, and Dipesh Chakrabarty have shown, but Asseraf insists that “too often in the colonial encounter, it is tempting to flatten each side’s sense of temporality into two blocs of Western and native time.” Instead, he argues, news about the outbreak of war traveled “across distinct genres of news, transforming temporalities as they moved” (p. 103). During the war, French authorities collected numerous examples of media genres circulating through Algeria, though they did not always understand them to be “news.” A prophetic Arabic manuscript purportedly written decades earlier by a Muslim scholar, for example, describes

France's exploitation of Algerians while predicting its demise at the hands of Prussia in 1870, and implied that 1914 would be a repeat performance. "The manuscript provided reassurance to Muslims by widening the temporal horizon," Asseraf argues, identifying "current disturbances as a minor predicament in the grand flow of history" while encouraging insurrection against the French (p. 110). Rumors played a vital role in shaping French responses to the German invasion of Belgium and northern France, but in Algeria authorities dismissed them as a "dysfunctional form of news with an inappropriate relationship to time" (p. 117). Given contemporary discussions about digital "fake news," readers will find Asseraf's analysis of racialized interpretations of *fausses nouvelles* particularly illuminating. For Marc Bloch, an intelligence officer in Algeria during war, rumors could not be "news" because they repeated common motifs, revealing more about a population's deeply-rooted *mentalités* than the war itself. The French saw print culture as tied to the rational exercise of citizenship in the present, but Muslims' supposedly superstitious and irrational nature left them "stuck in the past" and especially vulnerable to rumors. In the end, "both sides had trouble acknowledging that the other lived at the same time, and yet news circulated, evidence that all went through the same wartime" (p. 129).

Chapters four and five move forward to the 1930s, when the introduction of cinema and radio contributed to a "new geography of news diffusion" by layering onto existing media, "creating an intense and confusing maelstrom of news in a generalized context of international destabilization" (p. 131). Surveying the emergence of new viewing and listening practices alongside the colonial state's expanding surveillance, Asseraf argues that radio and cinema contributed to new forms of political participation by intensifying the quantity of information that people had access to, in turn connecting local political struggles to conflicts abroad. This was particularly the case during the Spanish Civil War, and after 1936, both fascist Spain and Italy intensified their Arabic-language propaganda directed at North Africans. Commentaries about the suffering of Muslim "martyrs" living under foreign occupation abroad further contributed to "proxy nationalism." Algerian political activism—in the form of meetings, newspapers, and fundraising drives—surrounding the Italian invasion of Libya, and later, events in the British mandate in Palestine, offered Algerians ways to discuss their own situation without directly criticizing the French. "Changing analysis of events in Palestine," Asseraf suggests, was "part of a gradual radicalization of politics in Algeria that made increasing use of 'colonialism' as a unified and negative category," while also providing a means to "debate the central political question of the time: whether civil rights should be sought within the French state or outside of it" (p. 177).

The principal strength of *Electric News* is its attention to the spatial and temporal dimensions of the Algerian information ecosystem and to competing cultural concepts of "news." One might read the book as an expansive critique of the implicit Eurocentrism of Western media histories. Understanding how media operated in colonial Algeria, Asseraf contends, means thinking of the newspaper or the telegraph as socially-constructed artifacts embedded in positivist narratives of media development. Although Asseraf underestimates recent turns in media history toward questions of intermediality and remediation, he rightly points out that the technological determinism of older historiographies made it "impossible to conceptualize multiple forms of media as coexisting at the same time," a logic that would have reduced Algerians' use of multiple communications to a "problem of periodization" (p. 7). One of Asseraf's principal goals is to challenge Benedict Anderson's notion that "vernacular print-capitalism" created nationalism, a model that never worked in Arabic-speaking countries. At the same time, *Electric News* offers a model of how to work with a relatively compact set of colonial surveillance archives to tell a

complex story. Asseraf uses social history and deep contextualization to read against the conclusions and findings of French authorities, returning political and social agency to populations that might otherwise appear solely as objects of investigation for the colonial state. Beautifully written and imaginatively executed, *Electric News* is an engaging social and political history of interwar Algeria that will interest not just scholars of North Africa and the Middle East, but historians of colonialism and mass media more broadly.

Rebecca Scales
Rochester Institute of Technology
rpsgsh@rit.edu

Copyright © 2020 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172