

# Global Media Journal

German Edition

## Book Review

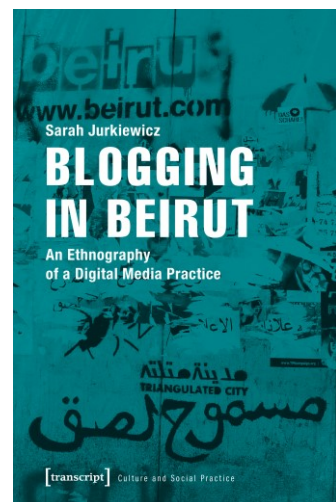
### **Blogging in Beirut – an Ethnography of a Digital Media Practice**

**Jurkiewicz, Sarah (2018): Blogging in Beirut. An Ethnography of a Digital Media Practice. Bielefeld: transcript. 374 Seiten. ISBN 978-3-8376-4142-4.**

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**To cite this article:** El-Richani, Sarah (2018). Jurkiewicz, Sarah (2018): Blogging in Beirut – an Ethnography of a Digital Media Practice. *Global Media Journal – German Edition*, 8(2).

The fact that Sarah Jurkiewicz’s book “Blogging in Beirut” is based on her PhD thesis, which was completed in 2012, reveals much about the book. First, the book is an academically sound and well-researched contribution to the field of socio-cultural anthropology of the Middle East. Second, although the book was published in 2018, the “snapshots” date back to the time frame between 2009 and 2011 when blogging was still pertinent. However, despite the dramatic decline of blogging, it is difficult to disagree with the author’s protestations culminating in the emphatic statement: “a study on blogging still matters!” (p.327).



Indeed, the study does matter. However, it is also necessary to acknowledge that this once-salient tool has all but lost its lustre. The author concedes this in several instances in the book but also contradicts herself when she argues that it is “by no means a shrinking phenomenon” and as proof refers to the *Third Arab Bloggers Meeting* held in Tunisia in 2011 (p.21). It is not clear why the author does not refer to the more recent 2014 summit, which appears to have been the last and is a further indication of the waning power of what she has termed “the temporary and fluid sphere of blogging” (p.26).

This issue notwithstanding, the ethnographic study of the group of Beirut bloggers is a pertinent contribution and offers a rare and thoughtful insight into the practice of blogging without the usual and rightfully-criticised dose of “technological determinism”. As briefly introduced above, the book focuses, neither on content, which remains key, nor the medium as Marshall McLuhan would prescribe, but on the offline practices of blogging production in pluralistic Lebanon. Jurkiewicz is correct in stating that the Arab blogger had been romanticised and orientalist but inadequately studied. So, the book aims to rectify this by probing blogging as a social field as well as assessing the production practices by way of case studies. It should be noted here that the author concedes that blogging is not quite the autonomous field but is linked to amongst others, the cultural, media and artistic fields or “domains of practice” (p. 321).

To execute her study, the author focuses on seven bloggers, who published in English or Arabic and whose blogs cover a variety of issues ranging from the political and social to the cultural. Drawing on ethnographic and practice theory, Jurkiewicz conducted two interviews with almost all of the bloggers in the sample as well as informal talks at events or whilst “hanging out” – as she casually put it.

As is common with lengthy academic monographs, some chapters flow better than others. The case studies, for instance, offer interesting snapshots of this dying breed’s habits, how “thoughts burst into writing”, as one of the bloggers featured termed it (p. 155) and how these bloggers perceived their audiences – both real and imagined (p. 210). The sub-chapter on the “positioning of the researcher” and the manner in which the bloggers expressed exasperation with her perceived slow pace of writing was delightful.

What is also particularly of interest is the link drawn between blogging and activism, particularly as one of the bloggers, who no longer updates his blog but is very active on social media, would go on to spearhead the “You Stink” protest movement in 2015 in light of the garbage and governance crises afflicting the beleaguered nation. It should be noted that all of the other bloggers sampled are currently also active on a number of social media sites including the micro-blogging platform *Twitter*. While the change in the “professional, personal and political trajectories” (XIV) of those sampled may certainly have been a factor in leaving blogging behind, it is not clear why the author belittles the impact of the rise of social media platforms, which may be regarded as more efficient. While contributing to the “wider discussion of the role of social media in the Middle East and beyond” (p.3) seems to be too grand an aim, this ethnographic approach certainly fills the gap left by studies focusing only on content and platform. Jurkiewicz’s book, which delves into the dynamics and context of media practices, shows how indeed addressing the online-offline continuum could be beneficial.