Critiques of the term ‘Middle East’ abound, often paired with robust demonstrations of the foundational and epistemological complicities of area studies in colonial machinations (Arondekar and Patel 2016; Bonine et al. 2011; Keddie 1973; Lockman 2016; Szanton 2004). Another common refrain is the geographical presumption that the West is the default starting point for regional positioning. Whether called the ‘Middle East and North Africa’ (MENA), ‘Southwest Asia and North Africa’ (SWANA), ‘Near East’ or any other term, all regional labels appear inadequate or indefensible. The same applies to the Arabic regional formations of al-Mashriq, al-Maghreb and al-Khaleej. Every demarcation creates its own containment and presumed centricity.

Bracketing the question of regional terminology, however, we still face the challenge of conceptualizing the regionality of media. This special issue queries two key and interrelated dimensions of regionality: first, how media enact a ‘Middle Easternness’ that is itself only ever partially stable, and second, how media bear the marks of national, intra-regional and trans-regional dynamics and circulations which exceed and destabilize the analyzable meaning of concepts such as ‘region’. Our counter-strategy is to approach ‘Middle East media’ as a series of interchanges, institutional priorities and felt mutualities—a thicket of uneven and multi-layered encounters—coherent through patterns of media among multiple neighboring countries that have historically grounded ties.

We take this approach because the cultural and media landscape is more contingent than what the frame of regionality allows. It is too easy to deploy it for simplified analytical utility. How does this special issue grasp regional-
ity? As the political economy of media research has demonstrated, production and distribution practices are a very real set of state and commercial interests formed in tandem with the global media landscape (Khalil 2013; Herbert et al. 2020). A ‘region’ is not just the result of ‘cultural proximity’, which makes Turkish dramas recognizable in the Subcontinent or telenovelas appear culturally near and far in the Levant, although lived regionality is a key part of the story. It is also the outcome of windowing strategies orchestrating global flows, the policies turning supranational language blocs into markets, the automated sorting of recommendation algorithms, the technical standards and IP laws locking DVDs and geo-blocking streaming (Kraidy 2005; Straubhaar 2007; Elkins 2019; Lobato 2019; Khalil and Zayani 2021).

The origins of this special issue lie within the potential complementarity between theoretical and methodological ferment in debates surrounding media industries research and insights of cultural analyses of audience, genre and politics of affect. Our desire to advance this discussion spurred a conference we organized at George Washington University’s Institute for Middle East Studies in 2021. These topics animate this special issue, which is not a new pitch in favor of area studies or a new critique of its endeavor. Rather, we aimed to collect different perspectives that when considered together, interrogate the relationship between institutional practices and cultural imaginaries. This special issue reconfigures our understanding of how political sovereignty, affect, cultural policy, infrastructure, cultural imaginaries and digital, televisual publics shape regionality. Consequently, the nation-state framework appears here as a key constellation of forces, as do the dynamics of intra-regional conflict and trans-regional formations. These articles show that media bearing the mark of the nation-state are often fundamentally a product of extra/regional economies. It is at these interstices that we can see how the ‘Middle East’ is reproduced in an ambiguous process whereby regionality is affirmed. A region is not a negative carving of some more natural order nor just a space of flows between national and global scales, but a relational coalescence contingent on its differentiation and ties to other regions. We take centering South-South flows and linkages to be an analytically essential perspective to grapple with the regional reproduction of the multipolar geopolitical-media order.

The historical frame for most of these articles falls within the last decade and a half, during the early 2010s, which now appears as a pivotal moment in the relationship between culture, media and the national frames welding them together. From the limited vantage point of the present, there seems to have been great consequence to the widespread adoption of smartphones and social media use coinciding with mass displacement, the 2011 Arab Uprisings, Gezi Park protests and the stabilization of counter-revolution as a permanent...
emergency. Rather than asking ‘where’ a region is located, making it a spatial question, several articles in this special issue rephrase the question in terms of time and history—‘when’ is the region, and what are the rhythms and temporalities giving it shape?

The deepest historical frame for the present in this issue can be found in Cooley’s article. She adopts a sonic methodology reaching into the 19th century to investigate how media infrastructure informs the racialization of the very South Asian migrant workers building and maintaining it, even as local forms of racial capitalism exclude them from the promises of the expat good life within the Arabian Gulf. Ahmed and Panetta examine how the reworking of history in historical TV drama becomes bound up with contemporary interstate conflict over an imagined anti-Ottoman Muslim, Arab and Mamluk past centered in Egypt. In a very different vein about Egypt and TV drama, Jaber interrogates how the sense of the nation under threat from within and without reappears as the threat of digital infiltration, in which the prospect of national humiliation is affectively recoded as masculine control. The future itself is also being imagined as the possibility of inter-regional consolidation, which as Petiwala analyzes, involves commoditized and branded celebrity forms, dispositions and images centered on ‘Dubai’, ‘Modi’, and ‘Shah Rukh Khan’.

Alongside the figuring of the past and the future, the contemporary moment is also frequently expressed as a kind of permanent crisis, even beyond the wholesale devastation in Libya, Syria and Yemen or the assaults on quotidian life across the region. Bulut theorizes how this sense of crisis is weaponized as ‘eventocracy’ by analyzing how the capture of Turkish media has enabled pro-AKP actors to ensure the party reigns supreme over the affective realm; factuality and truth are publicly overwhelmed by epistemic crises resolved in public feeling. In the concluding essay, Atwood adopts a comparative lens to reflect on informal media labor and state policy, or non-policy, in Lebanon and Iran, whose differences and unexpected similarities speak to ongoing debates in global media studies about the crisis-like nature of labor in precarious conditions.

These articles demonstrate the need for communication, culture and global media scholars to think capaciously about regionality. They also draw critical attention to how regionality is constituted when public culture, affect, political-economic structures and technology intermingle. Taken together, they invite us to be cautious and appreciative of what is at stake when we examine the region-making promise of media in movement.
Bibliography


