

# BOOK REVIEW

**Arthur Asseraf. *Electric News in Colonial Algeria*.** Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. 256 pp. 12 black and white images/maps. Footnotes. Bibliography. Index. \$80.00. Cloth. ISBN: 9780198844044.

Arthur Asseraf's *Electric News in Colonial Algeria* is a study of media transformations, news circulation, and the impact these had on society and politics in colonial Algeria from 1881 to 1940. This was a period of relative calm in the colony, in between bloody wars of conquest and independence. Yet, as Asseraf shows in this deceptively compact study, tensions continued to ripple under the surface, and they were only amplified by the arrival of new media genres: first the newspaper, then the telegraph in the second half of the nineteenth century, followed by cinema newsreels at the turn of the century and radio by the 1930s. Whereas the French—and a host of Eurocentric historical studies in their wake—saw these technological advances as hauling native Algerians out of “backwardness” and into modernity, *Electric News* shows that there was no such sudden or linear transformation; rather, “new forms of media piled onto existing ones, generating more intense and complex news” (9). The result was an unstable and heteroglot “news ecosystem” that produced the very opposite of a unitary and synchronous (national) imagined community; instead, the news “always leaked” (186) and was always distorted, exacerbating colonial divisions and heteronomy. “Algerians became more connected and more divided at the same time” (2), Asseraf argues, astutely exploiting the literal and figurative meanings of “electric” news. Most importantly, he shows how global circuits and domestic polarization—the metaphors come easily—turned many native Algerians toward transnational solidarities and a form of pan-Islamism that predated nationalist independence movements.


*Electric News* unfolds its analysis over five chapters, elegantly alternating between different media genres, panoramic overviews, and detailed case studies. Following in the footsteps of early modernists, Asseraf exploits police surveillance reports to capture the fleeting voices of native—and, for the most part, illiterate—Algerians, gauging both the vibe of popular conversations in *cafés maures* and the pitch of French authorities' epistemic anxieties. Much to French bafflement, print capitalism didn't “magically” take hold as

expected throughout Algerian society, and, where it did, it tended to have inflammatory effects (stoking anti-Semitic and anti-metropolitan feelings among French settlers, for example). The 1881 law that introduced freedom of the press in France was amended, in the three Algerian *départements*, by the law on the *indigénat* (also passed in 1881), that established an arbitrary regime of exception for natives—lumped together as “Muslims,” regardless of whether they practiced Islam or not—effectively maintaining censorship for them. As Asseraf shows, these dual legal and print regimes were fundamentally racializing in intent. The problem was neither one of language (Arabic newspapers were encouraged) nor of nationality (Spanish newspapers were fine); the problem was “Muslim newspapers.”

Chapters Two and Three—arguably the heart of the book—examine the impact of telegraph lines connecting Algeria to mainland France. Rather than abolishing time and distance, these redistributed space and rewired chronologies, with unforeseen side effects. Telegraph lines across the Mediterranean not only coupled colony to metropole, they also plugged Algerians into world news, allowing them to feel “Muslim” in another way. When Ottoman forces defeated the Greeks in 1897, rumors of an imminent liberation of all Muslims by Sultan Abdülhamid II spread like wildfire, fueling resentment at French rule and land dispossessions (including in remote villages of Kabylia, where bloody repression of the 1871 uprising had not been forgotten). The same happened during the First World War, when stories and songs spread news—quickly labeled “false news” by the French—of Kaiser Wilhelm’s conversion to Islam, announcing the imminent liberation of all Muslims in prophetic terms. If the telegraph spread the same information among different people, it couldn’t prevent them from emplotting it in different historical and geographical imaginations. Colonial globalization thus unwittingly made “Muslim Algeria into a globalized Islamic space” (97).

*Electric News* pursues this “social history of pan-Islamism from below” (67) through the early twentieth century, when cinema and radio added further layers of complexity to the Algerian media landscape. Asseraf is particularly interested in tracing the emergence of internationalist political movements in response to polarizing events such as the Spanish Civil War, the Italian invasion of Libya, and Palestinian “martyrdom” under the British mandate and with the establishment of the state of Israel. These struggles “held up a mirror” (169) to Algerians, spurred them to forge imagined communities *across* borders, and allowed them to use European propaganda against itself, as it were, to “unmask” the lies of European imperialism. Asseraf is keen to view these international movements on their own terms, not merely as “precursors,” but it isn’t entirely clear whether he sees them as a viable alternative to postwar nationalist movements in the struggle for Algerian independence. At any rate, the FLN, Franz Fanon included, succumbed to the same delusions as the French when it came to radio waves forging “peasants into Algerians” (183). As *Electric News* demonstrates, modern media produces imagined communities *and* imagined divisions, turning people

away from their neighbors and toward deterritorialized affinities—a conclusion that can be viewed both hopefully and ominously, whether viewed from inside colonial societies or from the vantage point of our present-day social media and socially-distanced societies.

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**For additional reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:**

- Dima, Vlad. 2019. “Waiting for (African) Cinema: Jean-Pierre Bekolo’s Quest.” *African Studies Review* 62 (1): 49–66. doi:[10.1017/asr.2017.153](https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2017.153).
- Lewis, William. 1969. “Algeria: The Cycle of Reciprocal Fear.” *African Studies Bulletin* 12 (3): 323–37. doi:[10.1017/S0002020600037616](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0002020600037616).