

authority. I therefore cannot say whether Brown's conclusions will be satisfying for those Muslim readers who do accept the moral authority of the early Islamic past, but I suggest they read the book to find out for themselves.

doi:10.1017/S0020743821000313

## **Electric News in Colonial Algeria. Arthur Asseraf, (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2019). Pp. 256. \$80.00 hardcover. ISBN: 9780198844044**

Reviewed by Julian Weideman, Department of History, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ, USA ([weideman@princeton.edu](mailto:weideman@princeton.edu))

*Electric News in Colonial Algeria* by Cambridge historian Arthur Asseraf is an excellent study of information and media in six decades of French rule in Algeria, 1881 to 1940, “the period of maximum French power in North Africa” (p. 2). The book analyzes a capacious and multilingual assemblage of newspapers, magazines, manuscripts, telegrams, films, songs, poetry, radio, and even rumors, accessed partly through surveillance records of reported speech. Asseraf addresses not only the content of the news in colonial Algeria but also the material infrastructure of its transmission and circulation, the experience of its consumption, and the political and sensory shifts it engendered.

Underpinning his inquiry is an ambitious, revisionist reading of Benedict Anderson's canonical portrayal in *Imagined Communities* of the relationship between “print capitalism” and nationalism. Where Anderson shows how print constituted the nation in the modern period, Asseraf argues that print along with other media polarized colonial Algeria, fracturing the country into competing polities. Asseraf's introduction makes clear that he intends the book as a contribution to global histories of the news. In his account, Algeria provides an example of the operation of the news in the late 19th and early 20th centuries; Algeria, in other words, becomes the locus for a question of universal import rather than an exceptional site, as the country is often framed in narratives of modern history. In large part, his book convincingly balances the global with the particular, delivering a theoretically rich account of the news without neglecting the Algerian context.

Asseraf's most compelling argument is a reconstruction of the relationship between news and time. Many readers will be familiar with Anderson's notion of an “empty, homogenous time” typified by newspaper reading and conducive to unitary nationalisms. Asseraf's critique replaces this concept with the finding that news in Algeria produced disparate concepts of time as multiple iterations of media, new and old, transmitted and printed, instantaneous and slower-moving, foreign and local, interacted with different readers and listeners.

Although the global purview of *Electric News* is evident, *IJMES* readers may be particularly interested in its relationship to literatures on the modern Middle East and North Africa. The book demonstrates command over an extensive body of English-language secondary work. (The discussion of French-language secondary literature is similarly thorough). One of Asseraf's references is On Barak's study of Egypt, *On Time*, which also revises Anderson although Barak's focus is on technology rather than an ostensible “print capitalism.” *Electric News* positions itself in conversation with scholarship on media by Ami Ayalon, Walter Armbrust, Ziad Fahmy, Rebecca Scales, and Andrea Stanton. Asseraf builds on the research on nationalism by Israel Gershoni, James Jankowski, Charles Smith, James McDougall, Mary Lewis, and Ziad Fahmy. Unusual for a work on French North Africa, *Electric News* includes literature on Libya and Palestine in a chapter (Chapter 5) about the news emanating from these places. A smattering of Arabic-language secondary sources—it would have been interesting to see broader use of this literature—connects *Electric News* to historiographical conversations in Arabic (Chapter 1).

Asseraf conducted archival research in Algeria, Tunisia, Italy, and France. Among his key primary sources are colonial administrative files, especially surveillance reports. Historians know to treat such sources with great caution. This type of material can shed highly partial light on Maghribi society and tends to predominate in scholarship on colonial North Africa that neglects materials in Arabic, to say nothing of other languages, e.g., Ottoman Turkish and Judeo-Arabic. Asseraf's use of Arabic sources adds significant depth to the study. He thoughtfully addresses his reliance on colonial archives by conceiving of media and surveillance as "two sides of the same coin" (p. 4). The argument rings especially true to anyone who has done research in the French Diplomatic Archives in Nantes and La Courneuve or the Overseas Archives in Aix-en-Provence, where folders of police material contain excerpts or even entire copies of North African newspapers and magazines. Asseraf also reframes the question of veracity by describing the constitutive quality of misunderstanding (p. 157). These points are well taken, but the source base of *Electric News* does remain, in this respect, somewhat conservative at a time when historians such as M'hamed Oualdi, Isabelle Grangaud, and Ismail Warscheid are rewriting North African history in part by distancing themselves from well-used French archives—even as such distance was impossible for many of the historical actors Asseraf selects, objects of or participants in the extensive networks of colonial record keeping (see especially Chapter 2).

*Electric News* stands out for its framework applicable to the experiences of both Algeria's settler minority and local populations, Muslim and, to a lesser extent, Jewish. This is no small feat. As Asseraf says, "It is surprisingly difficult to write about all Algerians with the same analytical gaze" (p. 12). By foregrounding "the news," Asseraf develops a narrative for much of colonial society; as he notes, "news was deeply gendered" (p. 20). This framework avoids uncritical portrayals of communal harmony, apologetic descriptions of colonialism's technological progress, or overdetermined accounts in which the War of Independence (1954–62) is inevitable. There is also a major achievement, namely, a global history of the news with colonial Algeria at its center.

It should be said that one of Asseraf's strategies for arguing this approach reveals tensions between his global history of media and other framings of Algerian history. He writes in his introduction that "Earlier scholarship on Algeria only dealt with either the European or the Muslim perspective" (p. 13). Hence his comprehensive analysis. There is, of course, another way to conceive of the problem. In his 2006 book *History and the Culture of Nationalism in Algeria*, James McDougall, one of the leading Algerianists of his generation, summed up the prevailing imbalance in the scholarly literature differently: "The history of colonial Algeria is ... primarily French history, and then the history of France-and-Algeria." McDougall's observation continues to hold, although the English and French literature has improved since then through the work of scholars such as Hannah-Louise Clark, Jeffrey Byrne, Jennifer Johnson, Sarah Ghabrial, Augustin Jomier, Charlotte Courreye, and Sara Rahnema, as well as McDougall's own recent *History of Algeria*. Asseraf cites McDougall's passage (p. 19), and it is possible to read the citation as countering his observation that past scholarship has "only dealt with either the European or Muslim perspective." This is no oversight on Asseraf's part but a product of his framework of global media history, whose analytical priorities differ to some degree from those of McDougall's statement. In the end, Asseraf cannot be criticized for pursuing his intentions: his history of information aims to include French archives and French actors in Algeria alongside other Europeans (e.g., Spaniards) and Algeria's Muslims and Jews.

*Electric News* is important reading for scholars in fields within and outside of Middle East and North African studies. Given Asseraf's conceptual contribution, he should reach a wide readership among scholars of nationalism, media, and colonialism, including those who are not necessarily familiar with the Middle East and North Africa. The book is written in a lively and direct style. The introduction, third chapter, and epilogue, in particular, provide a riveting display of argumentation with dazzling insights on time, news, and history writing.