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Precarity and Possibility

Government Intervention and Informal Media Work in the Middle East

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Abstract

At first glance, Iran and Lebanon may appear to have very little in common when it comes to state intervention in the media economy. The Iranian government oversees nearly every aspect of media production, distribution, and exhibition, while the Lebanese state exercises relatively little oversight of media and offers no financial or infrastructural support to the country's robust creative industries. Given the divergent approaches to regulating media in Iran and Lebanon, we might expect each to yield vastly different media labor conditions. Yet in this article, I argue the opposite. I demonstrate how the two extremes foster informal labor practices that are remarkably similar. By bringing together these two unlikely case studies, I advocate for informality as a constitutive feature of Middle Eastern media. Such a claim expands the growing body of scholarship on media labor by accounting for the triangulation of informality, state regulation, and worker subjectivity.

Keywords

circulation – informality – Iran – Lebanon – media labor – regulation

1 Introduction

The role of the government has been a constant preoccupation for scholars of media in the Middle East, and for good reason. Governments in the region use a variety of strategies to intervene in media production, distribution and exhibition. These strategies range from complex censorship practices and harsh regulatory policies to subsidy programs and generous financial incentives. Studies

in the field have focused on government intervention, producing a compelling if not somewhat overdetermined portrait of media culture in the region—one where individual state governments play a disproportionately larger role in creating and circulating media content. However, the emphasis on governmental policy has also stressed the formal mechanisms shaping media practices. This has been at the cost of detailed accounts of informal media economies and the labor that sustains them.

As I have argued elsewhere, heavy-handed regulatory policies create—perhaps counterintuitively—ample spaces for informal media practices (Atwood 2021). The more frequently governments attempt to control media, the more opportunities there are for producers, distributors and consumers to operate outside of those attempts at control. As much as government intervention may be a constitutive part of Middle Eastern media, so too is informality. Yet, the scholarship has addressed much less of the gray areas at the margins of government interventions. How do ordinary people navigate around policies to forge their media practices? Attention to informal media economies counters the tendency to view media in the Middle East from a politically determined perspective wherein formidable and even authoritarian governments wield all the power within media culture. Such a perspective denies ordinary people the agency to determine media access. By foregrounding informality, we might restore that agency while developing a more nuanced framework to describe state power over media in the region.

In what follows, I focus on media labor in the Middle East to theorize the relationship between government intervention and informality. I draw on examples from Iran and Lebanon, representing extremes of government intervention in media. On the surface, Iran and Lebanon may appear to have very little in common when it comes to the state's role in the media economy. The Iranian government attempts to oversee nearly every aspect of media production, distribution and exhibition. Consistent with its longstanding efforts to control media, the Iranian government enacts some of the most rigid regulatory policies in the world but also invests significant money to subsidize the country's media industries. In contrast, the Lebanese government exercises little oversight of media and offers no financial or infrastructural support to the country's robust cultural sector. This approach to art and culture is an extension of Lebanon's violent laissez-faire policies in other domains, too.

Given the divergent approaches to regulating media in Iran and Lebanon, we might expect each to yield vastly different labor conditions. I argue the opposite. I demonstrate how the two extremes foster informal labor practices that are remarkably similar. In both countries, many media workers—from video editors to distributors to content creators—labor outside the bounds of state

regulation and protection. Sometimes these conditions cast media workers as precarious subjects whose portfolio careers lack adequate compensation, guaranteed rights and steady employment. At other times, informal labor affords workers flexibility, mobility and the ability to navigate around social and legal barriers. By combining these two unlikely case studies, I advocate for informality as a constitutive feature of Middle Eastern media. Such a claim expands the growing body of scholarship on media labor by accounting for the triangulation of government regulation, informality and worker subjectivity.

To advance this argument, I examine the case of informal media distribution as a form of labor that highlights the precarity and the possibility of media work in Iran and Lebanon. By 'informal media distribution', I mean the labor circulating media outside government and corporate controls. Here I am taking cues from Ramon Lobato and others who have advocated for using the term 'informal' to describe such practices rather than the term 'piracy', which has become too loaded with conflicting cultural meanings to be a useful category of analysis (Lobato 2012). Informal media distributors are highly visible figures in Iran and Lebanon. In both countries, DVD sellers, hackers and second-hand booksellers work on streets and storefronts, playing a crucial role in how media circulate. However, their labor has not yet been adequately theorized. Because their work is outside the scope of formal labor and often villainized by global copyright regimes, scholars have paid less attention to these laborers' contributions, motivations and work conditions.

My observations in this article are based on two extended periods of fieldwork. Firstly, between 2015–2018 I interviewed dozens of informal media distributors in Iran, including several periods observing their work. Many of the workers I interviewed operated primarily during the 1980s–1990s dealing in films on videocassettes. However, I interviewed 16 contemporary distributors working with DVDs and digital files as well. Their work and insights have shaped my ideas about informality in Iran below. Secondly, since 2017 I have lived and worked in Beirut, where I regularly visit informal DVD shops as a customer and a researcher. These experiences interviewing employees and customers and observing shopfloor dynamics have informed my analysis of the labor of informal media distribution in Lebanon. My fieldwork has been supplemented with analyses of laws, policies and regulations. Together these qualitative methods yield a portrait of informal media distribution in Iran and Lebanon that captures the values and subjectivities of the people who perform this work and also of the structural forces shaping it.

2 Towards Informal Media Labor

It's difficult to situate the labor of informal media distribution—including its relationship to governmental intervention—into an existing body of scholarship. Informal media practices such as piracy have received less scholarly attention than formal ones. Furthermore, the growing literature on media labor depends on a vocabulary that may not appear readily applicable to informal laborers in Iran and Lebanon. Specifically, the literature largely focuses on formal industries and emphasizes creativity as a constitutive feature of media labor. This section makes a case for including informal practices in the turn to labor within media studies. As I demonstrate, informal media distributors are cultural intermediaries who deal in material and symbolic goods. Therefore, they shape circulation and people's access to media content and their interpretation of it.

Before describing the informal distribution as cultural labor, it is necessary to reflect on how governments typically shape media labor—whether informal or formal. Broadly speaking, the relationship between governments and media labor unfolds in two connected ways. Firstly, laws and policies determine labor conditions by categorizing labor practices; defining the relationship between employees and employers; and setting standards across all industries. Secondly, governments play a significant role in shaping the economic conditions under which laborers work. In many contexts over the last decade, this role has largely meant the implementation of neoliberal policies prioritizing the commodification of symbolic and informational goods, deregulation and global corporate interests.

At first glance, media work may seem far removed from the somewhat pedestrian concerns of labor and economic conditions determined by governments. This narrative is certainly touted in the popular discourse valorizing media work as exceptionally unique and fulfilling. Indeed, the tendency to view media labor as separate from state practices stems from the narrow framing of labor, which has historically been connected to physical effort, with the factory worker as the archetype of a laborer. Yet this elision is also strategic, playing into a larger neoliberal project. The idealistic rhetoric on creative work has undone decades of labor activism by positioning creative work as something unworthy of regulation (McRobbie 2016).

Over the last decade and a half, a powerful body of scholarship has provided a corrective to the idea that media work is somehow distinct from other forms of labor. Scholars (e.g., Gill and Pratt 2008; Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011; Mayer 2011; Duffy 2017) have shown that work within media industries is bound up in the same economic transformations governing labor conditions

writ large. The role of the government haunts the turn to labor within media and cultural studies. Sometimes governmental policies take center stage, such as studies examining the role of media labor unions in shaping cultural policies (Coles 2016). More often, though, the scholarship highlights the shrinking role of the state in regulating media labor, often emphasizing how governments prioritize global corporations over the rights of individual workers (e.g., Curtin, 2016). The emerging field of media labor studies has thus demonstrated that researching the political economy of media work requires accounting for the role of the government—whether in its forceful presence or its growing absence. Both perspectives are important to understanding the informal work of media distribution in Iran and Lebanon.

It may seem somewhat curious to include the work of informal distributors alongside that of content creators under the umbrella of 'media labor'. However, this article aims to broaden the understanding of media work. As media scholars, we might accomplish this objective by acknowledging informal distribution as creative work. Informal distributors are not rogue criminals, although that is what popular rhetoric on piracy might have us believe. Rather, informal distributors are tastemakers, playing an important role in how consumers make media content meaningful. They curate content, provide interpretations, suggestions and summaries, and serve as an important nodal point in the global circulation of entertainment media. Informal media distributors are what Pierre Bourdieu calls 'cultural intermediaries': 'sellers of symbolic goods and services who always sell themselves as models and as guarantors of the value of their products, who sell well because they believe in what they sell' (Bourdieu 1984: 365). Much like other creative types, cultural intermediaries such as informal distributors sell their subjective dispositions, including 'good manners, good taste or physical charm' (Bourdieu 1984: 152). Viewing informal distributors in this way is important. One of the reasons why informal media labor remains undertheorized is that it does not always fit easily alongside the growing body of scholarship on creative labor.

Taking informal media distribution seriously as a form of media labor opens new possibilities for studying media in the Middle East. Recent figures suggest that in countries like Iran, Lebanon, Syria and Turkey informal work constitutes a significant portion of economic output. By braiding together theories of informal circulation and media labor, we might begin to develop a framework to understand the informal practices that sustain media access in the region and generate considerable economic value. As demonstrated in the following sections, the economic value attached to informal media labor exists—at least partially—outside of government control and is very much shaped by it.

3 Risks and Rewards in Iran

The Islamic Republic of Iran is an example of a government's strong presence in the media economy. Its power over and commitment to media production and distribution can be seen in the numerous institutions it has established to encourage, oversee and regulate cultural work in the country. As Rahimi notes, 'there are 32 main branches or organizations that are subject to Iran's supreme leader … that work within the propaganda cultural apparatus' (Rahimi 2020: 204). This statement points to the sheer expanse of the Iranian state's support and regulation of the country's media. Nevertheless, these institutions are not homogenous. On the contrary, although all of them are aligned with the government, especially the country's supreme leader, they vary considerably in terms of their mission, policies and vision. There may not be a singular or unified vision for media within the state's cultural organs, but the state's role as a significant producer of media content is undeniable given the prolific activity of these 32 organizations.

In contrast to the powerful but fragmented role of the state as a media producer, the regulation of media tends to be centralized within the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (M.C.I.G.), which develops and implements policies dictating the media content that can be produced, distributed and exhibited in the country. For example, when it comes to cinema, M.C.I.G. intervenes in the life of a film at various stages, including the development of the screenplay, postproduction editing, distribution and exhibition. Despite M.CI.G.'s centralized role in regulating media in Iran, its power is not absolute or uncontested. Since its founding in 1982, there have been numerous instances when the ministry has allowed controversial films to be released, followed by a public firestorm heightened by the country's political factionalism. These instances reveal that M.C.I.G.'s policies do not represent a unified state vision but are rather a conglomerate of competing political interests.

This ecosystem, where the Iranian government plays a heavy-handed role in both producing and regulating media, inevitably affects those who labor within it. The state's omnipresence shapes creative work in numerous ways—from government-affiliated producers who create and disseminate state messaging to costume designers anticipating censorship codes to editors who create suggestive montages. The Iranian state's role in structuring the work of formal media production has attracted a fair amount of scholarly attention (e.g., Bajoghli 2019). Examining how the Islamic Republic's extreme interventions create informal media labor is equally important. On the surface, the relationship between state regulation and informal media labor may seem counterintuitive. After all, the Iranian state's close interaction with media production

and circulation would seem to leave very little room to operate outside its tight control. Nonetheless, as I have demonstrated elsewhere, the opposite is true (Atwood 2021). By delineating the bounds of formal media through its regulation and support, the Iranian state has also demarked the parameters of informal media.

Informal media distributors exemplify this point because they pick up what has been left out of formal media processes. The Iranian state has monopolized the formal distribution of media, including foreign movies, for decades. In 1994 it established the Visual Media Institute (V.M.I.), a clearinghouse for distributing movies on videocassette and later DVD. The media distributed through V.M.I. have exhibition permits from M.C.I.G. and, therefore, have been formally sanctioned by the government. Given the ministry's stringent guidelines, V.M.I. distributes a relatively small selection of movies and series. Even within that small list, foreign movies and series are often heavily censored. For example, I purchased a copy of *Game of Thrones* season five from the main V.M.I. store on Tehran's famed Valiasr Street, and the show was barely comprehensible because so many scenes had been cut or modified. Thus, the collection of formally sanctioned films and series distributed through V.M.I. leaves much to be desired.

Instead, the desires of ordinary audiences are often accommodated by a vast informal distribution system sustaining media consumption in Iran since the early 1980s (Atwood, 2021). Nearly everything is available within the informal market, from Hollywood blockbusters to Indian musicals to the latest Netflix originals—all uncensored and often dubbed into Persian or with subtitles. Such an expansive selection does not appear out of nowhere. A dedicated workforce produces and distributes these movies and series. Particularly important to the Iranian media landscape are the DVD sellers who peddle on sidewalks and in metros and even make house calls. They are not only a common sight on street corners but also figure prominently in popular culture. Recent movies, including *Sperm Whale* (Saman Moghadam 2015), *Taxi* (Jafar Panahi 2015) and *Be Human* (Majid Javanmard 2016), have represented these informal media distributors. Such representations indicate the extent to which informal distributors are important to media consumption in Iran.

Often selling copies of copies, informal media distributors in Iran operate outside of state and corporate controls. Their labor is informal because the media content they sell does not enter the state's regulatory machinery. Consequently, the economic value they generate is outside of the state's grasp and oversight. Their work conditions are also out of view to the state, aside from their extra-legal status. As a result, informal DVD sellers are precarious workers incurring incredible individual risk. Part of that risk is financial because

they invest in equipment and material necessary to produce DVDs with prerecorded content, and there isn't a guarantee they will recuperate this investment through sales. Their financial risk is especially prevalent now that DVD sellers must compete against streaming platforms for viewers. The precarity of informal distributor work is also wrapped up in the risks they assume concerning personal safety—distributing unpermitted media is illegal, and these informal workers can be arrested for their activities. During my fieldwork in Tehran, I saw police arrest numerous sidewalk DVD sellers, confiscating their entire stock. This is also a common theme in popular representations of DVD sellers, such as the movies I listed above. Dealing with unpermitted media in Iran has long been risky business since it works against the state's desire to tightly control media access in the country.

However, with this precarity comes possibility. DVD sellers are unlike other vendors populating street corners in Iran. They sell products with financial and symbolic values, so their work is cut from a different cloth. In other words, many DVD sellers enter the work of informal media distribution because it allows them to work in the movies, albeit tangentially. This idea was reinforced in interviews conducted with informal media distributors in Iran. They all emphasized that their motivation for beginning this line of business was never financial, even if the money was sometimes good, especially during the heyday of the DVD. Instead, they described the work as personally fulfilling. As one DVD seller in north Tehran told me, his work is 'part of his identity' (jozv-e hoviyyat). Others echoed this sentiment, finding value in the opportunity to watch and discuss movies regularly. A DVD seller I met in Yazd told me that for him the real income (dar-umad) is when a customer returns the next day to tell him that his movie suggestion was a smash hit at home. Statements like these suggest how informal media distributors in Iran describe their labor. Although their work is technically illegal, they do not see themselves as criminals but rather as an integral part of how movies circulate and find viewership in the country.

This pattern is detailed in a well-known case in Iranian cinema. Abbas Kiarostami's acclaimed 1990 film *Close-Up* chronicles a real-life event in which Hossein Sabzian—a young, unemployed father—impersonates the famous director Mohsen Makhmalbaf. Driven by his love of cinema, Sabzian seeks no financial gain in his impersonation; instead, he only wants to occupy the world of cinema, even if only momentarily. Sabzian is inevitably caught and brought to trial, but the charges against him are dropped when the deceived family forgives him. The real Sabzian would quickly fade into obscurity after his short-lived fame from *Close-Up*. He died in 2006 while selling movies on DVD in a Tehran metro station. Shortly before his death, still committed to a life in the

movies, he was recorded saying, 'I dreamt of being a general … but ended up a foot soldier' (Ferguson, 2006: n.p.). While Sabzian had once imagined becoming a great director like Makhmalbaf, he eventually resigned himself to a life of selling DVDs underground. However, his statement suggests he did not see his work as a foot soldier to be entirely separate from that of a renowned director like Makhmalbaf. The labor of circulating movies on DVD is an important extension of the filmmaker's work and other creative laborers in the film industry.

Ultimately, the precarity and the possibility of informal media work in Iran are tied to the government's interventions in the media economy. Since regulatory policies are so stringent, they create a surplus of global media content unaccounted for in the country's formal media systems. Informal media distributors pick up the slack, providing access to global content that would never be sanctioned by the state. This work is risky but also rewarding for those who perform it. Indeed, the rewards are won through the risks. While informal media distributors in Iran are subject to arrest, they often find their work self-actualizing, an opportunity to enter a creative world of movies and series they may not otherwise access. This vibrant world exists at the margins of the state's attempts to control media.

4 Laissez-Faire Lebanon

In contrast to the Iranian government's heavy-handed interventions in the media economy, the Lebanese state plays a minor role in supporting and regulating media within the country. Lebanon is perhaps the only country in the region where creative workers lament the lack of state involvement in cultural production (von Maltzahn 2018: 330). Despite this, on paper Lebanon has established a clear role for the government to oversee the country's cultural sector. At least rhetorically, developing the country's cultural industries was a priority for policymakers in the two decades following the civil war (1975–1990). The Ministry of Culture was established in 1993, first as part of the Ministry of Culture and Higher Education and later becoming an entity in 2000. Building on this momentum, the Lebanese Parliament passed a suite of ambitious cultural laws in 2008. These laws—including Nos. 35, 36, 37 and 56/2008—outline the organization of the ministry, the role of public institutions in the cultural sector, the need to protect cultural property and the rights of cultural workers and their syndicates. The increasing attention to cultural policy in Lebanon is consistent with a larger pattern in the Arab world during the 2000s, as state and civil society actors became interested in developing and advocating for policies

that might enrich cultural sectors, and therefore, advance national economies (Hajj Ali and von Maltzahn 2021).

Even though 'cultural policies' have become an important part of the discourse for government officials and N.G.O. workers in Lebanon, they have never been fully implemented. Some scholars argue that the lack of funding allocated to the Ministry of Culture has impeded the implementation of these policies (Geagea 2021). Certainly, the cultural sector's legal framework requires heavy government investment, which is inherently at odds with the state's neoliberal posturing. With the 2008 laws lying dormant, the cultural sector—much like many other sectors in the country—relies entirely on private funding (Abou Harb 2021). The reliance on private funding plays into the country's fragmented political system, where individual sectarian-based political parties benefit from the state's inefficiency by privatizing public services. As a result, the Ministry of Culture's failure resembles similar circumstances in other state institutions, they are kept ineffective to protect the ruling elite's political and financial interests (Majed 2022). Nowhere is this trend more evident than in the various syndicates for cultural workers, which according to my interlocutors, are so overrun with sectarian politics they are ineffective at protecting labor rights. In the end, while the legal structure governing Lebanon's creative sector may promise strong state support, that vision has never materialized, instead leaving the country without a formal infrastructure to facilitate cultural work.

If state support of cultural work in Lebanon is frenetic, so too is regulation. The censoring and licensing of cultural works falls under the jurisdiction of the country's intelligence agency: the General Directorate of General Security. Charged with protecting national security, the department exercises great autonomy in reviewing and regulating movies, social media posts, theater productions and other creative outputs. General Security adjusts its hold over cultural production according to political whims, 'heightening or reducing restrictions according to the prevailing political circumstances and the dictates of the various political and religious powers and parties' (Saghieh, Saghieh and Geagea 2010: 5). Likewise with support of cultural work, the state promises more than it delivers in terms of regulation. In theory, General Security wields significant power to censor cultural works, and there have been several high-profile cases over the last decade expressing this power. However, in practice, uneven and haphazard implementation has meant that many works slip through the cracks.

This pattern is especially true when it comes to media distribution and circulation. While there are measures in place to review imported media content, they depend on a physical object inspected at the airport, where General Security has a strong presence. For example, a 35 mm film reel shipped to Lebanon

in advance of a prominent film festival would be eligible for inspection upon arrival at the airport. While a digital file used to produce a DVD would not trigger the same process, especially if no public exhibition is involved. Hence, a great deal of media circulation happens outside of the state's view, even if these activities are highly visible in the many DVD shops found in the country. The Lebanese government has committed to ramping up its enforcement of intellectual property rights law, even establishing a Bureau of Cybercrimes and Intellectual Property. Nevertheless, the informal circulation of copyrighted material is still prevalent. Although there are no recent figures to capture the extent of this informal circulation, a trip to nearly any DVD store in the country reveals an entire stock of pirated movies and TV shows in plastic sleeves. Thus, a large portion of media circulation in the country happens outside of state regulation and oversight, even though the Lebanese government ostensibly has the authority to control distribution practices.

Thus, a great deal of media labor is performed in Lebanon irrespective of the state, which exercises relatively little control over the cultural sector because of insufficient funding, a fragmented political system and ineffective syndicates. The state's relationship with the cultural sector inevitably impacts the workers who labor within the country's creative industries. Here, the lack of state intervention produces informal labor. Whereas in Iran, media workers sometimes labor informally to circumvent state regulation, in Lebanon informal media work is often the default, a consequence of the country's failing state. The precarity and possibilities of informal media labor are remarkably similar in Lebanon to those in Iran, especially concerning the country's informal media distributors.

Unlike the sidewalk DVD vendors in Iran, whose pop-up shops appear as quickly as they disappear, in Lebanon many DVD sellers have brick-and mortar-stores that seem very formal, complete with elaborate signs and window displays. Over the last two years, an economic crisis, soring internet prices and failing electrical infrastructure have ensured the continuing relevance of DVDs. Affordable and easily accessible, movies on DVD remain an attractive alternative to streaming media content online, the latter requires internet data and a steady supply of electricity. Despite the centrality of DVD shops to Lebanese society and their very formal appearance, these operations are still very much informal in that they largely exist outside corporate and state regulation. Indeed, most of the movies and series sold within these shops consist of pirated material, unsanctioned by the studios producing it and unlicensed by the state.

As a result, the people who work in these stores, those who help circulate culture in the country, are to an extent precarious workers. DVD shops in Lebanon

are something of an open secret. Ordinary people recognize them as technically illegal but still socially acceptable. Some DVD stores have the backing of powerful political figures, but for others, the threat of getting caught lurks in the background and could involve steep fines. The precarity of this work does not just involve the looming threat of regulation and the absence of a social safety net. Since the state has not made strides to subsidize cultural work in the country, informal media distributors are left without access to the National Social Security Fund, covering most formal sector employees. Similarly, in this harsh economic climate, they are not given any subsidies to continue their important cultural work. This sense of neglect was important to the people I interviewed.

Beyond the precarity of these cultural workers, informal media distribution in Lebanon is also marked by possibility. DVD shops in Lebanon alert us to one significant feature of informal work: it is often highly systematized. The global discourse on piracy—seeking to vilify informal media circulation—portrays work like DVD selling as criminal, chaotic, frantic and hurried. However, this totalizing rhetoric does not capture the pleasures or precision of the Lebanese DVD shop. Comparable to the DVD sellers in Iran, the DVD shop owners I interviewed in Lebanon regaled me with their deep knowledge of world cinema. Sometimes their enthusiasm shapes the layout of the stores. For example, a well-known DVD shop in Bourj Hammoud, a municipality adjacent to Beirut, is famed for the specific categories of film displays, such as 'Italian horror films'. Such careful curation and presentation of DVDs highlight the important role of informal media distributors as tastemakers. Their knowledge and displays direct customers to particular kinds of movies. The DVD shop owners I interviewed marveled that their businesses—on the cusp of collapse for over a decade—continue to thrive, though modestly. Their continuing success suggests the possibilities that come with this kind of informal labor.

5 Conclusion

I have demonstrated that informal media labor is produced through varying degrees of state intervention. While the Iranian government pours considerable resources into encouraging and regulating the country's creative sector, the Lebanese government has adopted a more hands-off attitude, offering little in the way of infrastructure, regulation and support. Despite significant differences in these two approaches to intervening in media, both result in informal labor conditions for workers in the cultural sector. In both countries, many creatives labor outside the state and corporate control, either to sidestep harsh regulatory measures or as a matter of fact in the absence of state protection.

This pattern, especially visible among DVD sellers in both countries, might easily be overlooked since few comparative studies between Iran and Lebanon exist. The absence of this kind of comparative work is largely due to the structure of Middle Eastern media studies as a field, which tends to organize itself around national and linguistic borders. By putting these two contexts in conversation, important similarities rise to the surface, including the prevalence of informal work within creative sectors. Studying informal labor offers fresh insight into the role of media in the region by attending to important processes hidden and off the formal record. Consequently, this article also provokes more comparative media studies within the region. Such studies would undoubtedly surface the significance of informal media economies across the Middle East. Undeniably, informality needs to be foregrounded as an important feature of media in the Middle East. Doing so would push back against a long tradition of media scholarship prioritizing and even valorizing formal media practices over ordinary informal practices making media production and access possible worldwide.

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