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Past Issues

□ Sakr, Naomi (Ed):

Arab Media and Political Renewal: Community, Legitimacy and Public Life

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A Review by Helga Tawil-Souri

Naomi Sakr brings together scholars analyzing the elusive connection between political change and media in the Arab world. The book widely defines the political and the audience: the political herein includes popular expression, demonstrations, polls, differences in coverage of political events, and marginalization of certain populations; the audience is problematized by including journalists, government officials, NGOs, academics, citizens-demonstrators, youth populations, and diasporic communities. Together, the chapters offer contemporary snapshots of a growing media landscape (all but one dealing with Arab television), providing some informative background on what is happening on Arab screens and streets. The book fills a gap of an Arab cultural studies that until now exists “only as fragments without coherence or any sense of direction” (168). Based on a conference in which the contributors undoubtedly dealt with the predominant question when it comes to Arab media – whether, and how, pan-Arab satellite TV stations provide a new pan-Arab public sphere – the chapters are all in a conversation with Habermas’ normative notion and existing studies on Arab media that deal with that question, most notably Marc Lynch’s *Voices of the New Arab Public*.

I would recommend reading Tariq Sabry’s chapter twice, once as an introduction and once again as a conclusion, for it provokes the reader to see the collection with a much wider theoretical and epistemological scope. For any of the shortcomings that may exist in some of the chapters, they do begin to address – albeit not all, and unequally among them– the structures of feeling of Arab societies, peering into the time-space particulars of the grittiness, ordinariness, and everydayness of Arab culture.

In so far as the volume is in conversation with studies of the public sphere, Oliver Hahn’s chapter provides a helpful review of the notion’s European roots and scholarship on pan-Arab TV that has focused on the question of whether it, and specifically Al Jazeera, provides a new trans-national public sphere. While Hahn offers insightful critiques, he only sketchily touches on a theoretical reformulation of the public sphere, the common concept threading through the following chapters.

Marwan Kraidy makes the argument that *Star Academy*, a widely popular reality TV program, is political because it led to debates and articulated an alternative view of public participation. A much less convincing argument is that *Star Academy* is political because its soundtrack is based on a counter-cultural US media product from the 1960s.

Regardless, Kraidy addresses a hugely contested phenomenon on Arab TV – reality programming – and intertextual responses to it in Kuwait and Lebanon. It would have been nice to read some audience responses, not only elite reactions in Kuwait or the better-described popular movements in Lebanon covered in Lina Khatib's chapter. The "Beirut Spring" demonstrations after Hariri's assassination in 2005, Khatib argues, provided the first time when "television spoke for the Lebanese public, and the public was able to speak through television"(29). She brings up many interesting anecdotes and connects them to a range of issues that speak to television's importance as a symbolic battlefield during a revolutionary time in Lebanese politics: how the demonstrations were televisual events evolving into an "electronic monument", and how the demonstrators possessed a high degree of media literacy in their renegotiations of media examples and performances that often seemed consciously made for TV. Moving beyond a concern for virtual space, Khatib also posits public action's necessary relationship to physical place.

Imad Karam's chapter challenges the hopes of pan-Arab TV serving as a public sphere by highlighting how a majority of Arab population, the youth, are still marginalized by its programming availability. His research is one of only two in the volume that relies on in-depth research with audience members, in his case 17-26 year-olds in Egypt, Jordan, Palestine and the UAE. He finds that although new channels (such as Mazzika and Melody) have come into existence that target – and are popular with – the youth, the latter nevertheless lack programs that allow them to represent themselves, and veer away from the didactic tone that most channels use to address youth (with the host often being an older figure). Through the interviews, Karam also finds that entertainment programming provides a needed "breathing space", in the words of the one of the interviewees, for youth to distance themselves from individual and larger problems in their everyday lives. Dina Matar is concerned with similar issues, but among a different population: diasporic Palestinians living in the UK. Her chapter is theoretically well-grounded and the second to look at how audiences engage with media in their identity "consolidation" and "recreation" (124). In researching how these audience members think about themselves, their identity and their community around them (in the UK and in their attachment to a larger imagined collective of the Palestinian nation), diasporic Palestinians are in a "continuous negotiation of positionings between what it means to be Palestinian and what it means to be cosmopolitan in the diasporic space" (119-120). She claims that while her informants grew more aware of their transnational connectivity and their consciousness of a Palestine-centered identification, they also thought about their participation in public life of their host cultures, thus, not simply leading "dual lives", but intricately participating in a diverse set of public spheres.

The influence of the "outside world" on Palestinian society takes a different form in Bruce Stanley's chapter on media intervention in Arab countries – with a particularly stronger presence in the Palestinian-Israeli context. He tracks various media development strategies by Western NGOs in the Arab world and offers a helpful typology of those projects. He makes the claim that most of these media interventions (whether they attempt to back a particular political option, decrease violence, change societal behavior,

craft political space, or direct themselves to build-up dialogue, mutual understanding or peace) are constructed by donors with a “an idealized version of the media and its capabilities” (152), ignoring regional and international forces that lead and contribute to conflict, to structural asymmetries, and to repression and denial of identity. He subtly, but convincingly, makes the conclusion that “media interventions for peace are liable to become part of the problem, not part of the solution” (153).

Let me make brief mention of two chapters whose methodological and theoretical frameworks regrettably prevent them from moving beyond obvious conclusions. Giovanna Maoila and David Ward’s comparative content analysis on coverage of Palestinian elections by Palestinian and pan-Arab TV channels leads them to the conclusion that these represent two parallel TV systems with different production and editorial boundaries, not necessarily resulting in pluralistic and better-quality journalism. While Albrecht Hofheinz provides a convenient listing of popular websites and references on Internet studies in the Arab world, the multitude of unaddressed problems of conducting research on Internet-use undermine the chapter. He does not problematize the connection between attitudinal changes in the virtual and realm realms; most of his data on user preference comes from on-line polls and statistics (often from one source); and finally makes an overly optimistic claim that expression through blogs and podcasts will “empower” Arab citizens, without ever looking at whether anyone is listening (or reading) to the subaltern speak.

Sabry’s concluding chapter brings up critical concerns about the epistemological, existential and hermeneutic concerns that should drive studies of Arab cultures and societies: that scholars need to better theorize how complex and stratified audiences are. He argues that the cultural studies tradition is the best epistemic space from which to situate the specific temporalities within which such media expressions operate, whether those structures of feeling are products of colonialism (that Stanley’s chapter indirectly alludes to) or due to internal power dynamics (as Khatib, Maoila and Ward, and others address). He suggests that “what is required is qualitative research with the potential for investigating the social world of Arab audiences and their interpretations of it” (160), which certainly Matar, Karam and Khatib achieve in this volume. In his call for a need to articulate the relationship between culture and power, he suggests that an Arab cultural studies should also incorporate a political economy emphasis as a complementary perspective. True to form then, Sakr – herself a prominent researcher on the political-economic landscape of Arab media – has included Stanley in this volume, but also scholars using other methodological perspectives: from those who rely on overly quantitative methods (such as Maiola and Ward, and Hofheinz), to those who look at intertextual influences in media (Kraidy), from those who consider a spatial link between material and virtual expressions (Khatib), to those based on in-depth interviews with specific audience members (Karam and Matar).

As a whole, Sakr’s volume brings together a collection of essays that succeed in raising “doubts about the generalization that can be made regarding television programming as

either a reflection of, or an influence on, what large sections of the population think” (5). The chapters look at different trans-national, national and sub-national contexts (diasporic communities, youth, demonstrators in Lebanon, journalists covering Palestinian elections, Kuwaiti Members of Parliament, to rename a few), and to raise the reader’s awareness of the diversity of audience responses. Sakr’s volume would have benefited even further had all the chapters truly been concerned with “audience research” (2). No doubt the collection exposes readers to an array of media programming, to the specificities of smaller segments of what is often mis-interpreted as a large mass called the “Arab street”, and engages the reader with rich examples of a still relatively understudied area of media research. Sakr’s latest edited volume explores the transformations of Arab media and Arab politics, and the complicated relationship between these two constantly shifting landscapes. The contributions offer readers a nuanced, complex, and contradictory approach to a vibrant media-politics, and for that, the book is a worth it read.

Reference

Lynch, Marc. 2006. *Voices of the New Arab Public: Iraq, Al-Jazeera, and Middle East Politics Today*. New York: Columbia University Press.

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