Arab Television in Academic Scholarship

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Abstract

Over the past 10 years, there has been an exponential increase in satellite television in the Arab world, with programming ranging from music videos to news, from reality TV programs to Islamic talk shows. Concurrent with this development has been the growth of academic scholarship on understanding the relationship between Arab television and social and political transformations in the Middle East. This article provides an overview of Arab television growth, especially that of pan-Arab satellite channels such as Al-Jazeera, and of scholarship about it. Academic work that focuses on theories of media globalization and the public sphere, and that is in conversation with Western journalism and global media studies, is highlighted.

Pan-Arab satellite television is exploding: exploding in quantity to more than 350 free-to-air channels now available in the region; exploding on the political scene, with repercussions in the Arab world and beyond; and exploding as an area of academic inquiry. Scholars seem to be wondering whether the world of Arab media suggests social change toward Western forms of democratization or towards more 'fundamentalism'. While no one agrees on which direction these shifts are leading the Arab world into, there is no doubt that the impact of media is central to important transformations, no matter their direction.

The 'explosion' of Arab television has been recent, with the majority of channels launching in the last 3 years. In 2000, there were less than 60 free-to-air channels in the region; by late 2007, there were over 350. Scholarship of this particular media has followed a similar timeline. What was a rather small and marginalized area of study (Arab media in general) in the early and mid-1990s has today become a burgeoning field, symbolized in the growth of scholarly writing on the matter, the growing representation of Arab media topics in communications, anthropology and Middle East studies academic conferences, the increase in students wishing to research Arab media, and a rise in academic and professional institutions and journals whose sole focus is the analysis of Arab television (or Arab media and popular cultural expression more broadly). While a thorough overview of this scholarly attention would require an entire book, what I do in the

following sections is highlight some of the important contributions that analyze the rise, role, and impact of Arab television specifically as they concern a renegotiation of the process of media globalization and the creation of a trans-national public sphere.

In the following, I trace some of the burgeoning scholarship of Arab television, as it falls into the categories of media structure, content, and audiences – with a recognition that some scholars address more than one of these three facets of media. Here, I am only interested in English language works that deal specifically with television production, distribution, and/or consumption in the Arab world. While there are also interesting transformations in the landscape of television in the Middle East as a whole – including Turkey, Israel, and Iran – I focus specifically on *Arabic language* television. There is also a growth of scholarship on representations of Arab in various media – whether Western or Arab, fictional or informational – unfortunately beyond the purview of this paper. Moreover, while more and more programs frame their messages from an Islamic perspective, and certainly much of the Arab world is Muslim, I am not here referring to the *Muslim world*, but to the *Arab world*. Too often the two are conflated – which is not to say that we should not recognize the extent to which Islam influences and is imbued, and in turn is shaped back, by Arab culture.

350 channels (and so much is on)

The ownership structure of Arab television has expanded well beyond the national state-channels of 10 or 15 years ago, and certainly beyond the early independence years when media were handed over by colonial powers to the newly established state governments. Some of the scholarship on the early years of Arab television includes Douglas Boyd's *Broadcasting in the Arab World* (1999) and Kamalipour and Mowlana's edited volume *Mass Media in the Middle East* (1994), both of which comprehensively delineate the institutional and regulatory frameworks of broadcasting country by country, providing a useful description of the era during which television was still largely state-owned, and often highly censored. While Egypt may have been the center of cultural production throughout most of the 20th century, thus making it the focus of scholars such as Walter Armbrust (1996), it is losing ground to Lebanon, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and to a lesser extent Syria and other Arab nations, with the advent of satellite technology. Naomi Sakr's *Satellite Realms* (2001) which provides a comprehensive political economy analysis of pan-Arab and national satellite stations is a seminal text in understanding the ownership structure of the new broadcasting landscape. Launching television stations remains a capital-intensive enterprise dominated by economic elites; however the political elites are loosening their nooses around broadcasting, although to different degrees among the different Arab countries; here, William Rugh's (2004) taxonomy of a 'mobilization' (Syria, Libya, Sudan, pre-2003

Iraq), a 'loyalist' (Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, UAE, Palestine), a 'diverse' (Lebanon, Kuwait, Morocco, Yemen), and a 'transitional' (Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia, Algeria, post-2003 Iraq) press proves helpful in understanding the transition from 'traditional' media such as newspapers and radio to 'new' satellite TV. The relationship between station owners and local governments is still strong, at times tenuous and tense, but the escalating variety of owners has begun to undermine various states' control over media production; and in countries in which state-control of media is still strong, neighboring satellite channels are perceived as a threat (some of which physically broadcast from Western Europe). The launch of satellite stations has also come to serve broader (national) political strategies, as new media powerhouses such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Lebanon vie for audiences and advertisers beyond their national borders. Naomi Sakr's *Arab Television Today* (2007), which casts a wider theoretical net than her 2001 monograph on the same subject, includes the important changes which have taken place in the Arab television landscape in the 2000s. Moreover, once marginalized or oppositional groups have increasingly joined the media foray; for example, Hizballah's Al Manar station beams across the region and enjoys wide popularity.

Arab audience members are finding themselves increasingly in control over their media diets, no longer beholden to their national (didactic) TV channels. The range in ownership structure has meant that many ideological, religious, political, and aesthetic flavors are available to viewers. Programming variety is wide-ranging (for a good introduction to programming range and research thereon, see the on-line academic journal *Transnational Broadcasting Studies*, revamped into *Arab Media & Society* in 2007). The most popular shows – in terms of quantity of broadcasts and audience size – are news, music videos, and reality/game show programs; thus perhaps unsurprisingly, the majority of scholarship about Arab television content focuses on these three genres. Drama series, situational comedies, and feature-length or made-for-TV movies exist, as well as children's programming, documentaries, and the growth of what can be loosely termed 'Islamic programming', available not only on the 'religious channels' but increasingly on secular, national, and pan-Arab channels (Echchaibi 2007; Wise 2003, 2005).

Variety is obvious, for example, in news programming, ranging from the 'mainstream' Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya; to Western/foreign voices such as American Al Hurra and its British, French, Israeli, and Iranian counterparts broadcasting in Arabic; to the more jingoistic Al Manar and Al Aqsa TV, the latter from Hizballah and Hamas, respectively. In the realm of music videos, which are a sizeable component of programming, with many satellite channels devoted exclusively to them, pop icons range from female stars flaunting their skin and sexuality (such as Lebanese singer Haifa and Egyptian singer Ruby) to male pop stars espousing 'good' Muslim values. Sami Yusuf, a British-born Muslim singing in Arabic and English (and languages common in the 'Muslim world' such as Turkish

and Hindi) on themes closely linked to the Quran, espousing the values of living a pious Muslim life, is no longer alone in the realm of popular (and in his case, youth-targeted) Muslim pop-stars (for an in-depth analysis of Sami Yusuf, see Pond 2006).

There has been tremendous growth of female-led and female-targeted programming, also offering a wide spectrum of representations of the 'Arab' or 'Muslim' woman (see Mernissi 2004 and Otterman 2006 for a discussion of the new image of the 'powerful' woman on satellite TV). One popular talk show broadcast from Egypt is hosted by Dr. Heba Kotb in which she discusses, and fields questions from audience members, about intimate sexual details while simultaneously quoting the Quran (Swank 2007). Concomitantly, there has also been a growth of stations by and for women, such as the 2002-launched Lebanese Heya TV, analyzed by Dina Matar (2007a).

Certainly, the larger format of reality TV and game shows has taken the Arab world by storm, with various copy-cat formats of Western shows such as *Big Brother*, *American Idol*, and *Who Wants to be a Millionaire*. Marwan Kraidy's recent work (2005, 2007) analyzes the media-politics of reality shows such as *Star Academy* in terms of both the show's contestants and audience-voters demonstrating their nationalist sentiments and the wide-ranging debates that the show brings to the fore in countries such as Lebanon and Kuwait. Joe Khalil (2005) also analyzes the political impact of reality TV across the Arab world and particularly in Saudi Arabia. While the United States's Coalition Provisional Authority-run Al-Iraqiya's 2005 reality TV show, *Terrorism in the Hands of Justice*, has yet to make it into any scholarly accounts, it does bear mentioning here as a new form of reality programming that will no doubt receive much academic attention: the show features captured insurgents confessing to a variety of alleged crimes and vices that clearly disdains any geopolitical agreements on prisoners' rights (Carroll 2005). Dubai TV's *Green Light*, a game show promoting ethical/Muslim values with contestants competing over the creation of projects to help the poor, the underprivileged, and refugee or war-struck children is the focus of Lindsay Wise's research (2005).

It must be noted that many genres, such as reality TV or music, also bleed over into that of 'religious programming'. The Saudi-based Iqra channel was the first channel to broadcast Muslim-only programming in 1998, which consisted mostly of calls to prayer, images of pilgrimage and holy sites, and 'traditional' (and often older male) preachers hosting talk shows and on-air sermons. In response to the mushrooming youth population and a growing sense of popular religiosity, channels like Al Resallah have come into existence more recently, in this case in 2005, that popularize Islam. Herein, Islamic programming moves beyond the traditional (and in some eyes 'boring') programming of Iqra, to include Islamic music videos, enlivening news programs, game shows and quizzes, and increasing numbers of women and youth in the programming mix. Iqra has also responded

to shifting cultural tastes and hosts the most popular Islamic televangelist, Egyptian Amr Khaled, who reigns as the most popular media-based preacher. Lindsay Wise's research (2003) contextualizes the growth of Islamic TV preachers, and Amr Khaled specifically. Nabil Echchaibi's (2007) research also looks at the growth of Islamic programming on television.

Bruce Springsteen's 1992 song title '*57 Channels (And Nothing's On)*' rings a little less true in the pan-Arab spectrum. There is variety as much as there is a plethora of channels: more than 350 channels with 'a lot on'. And there is an increase in scholarship that describes what is 'on'.

Complicating media globalization

Scholarship about Arab television is in conversation with media studies from other regions, especially the United States and Britain. Perhaps more importantly, scholars are also in constant debate with the (American/ Western) mainstream perspective espoused by politicians, journalists, and media personalities about the Arab world's 'uniqueness' as a non-democratic region and their concern about whether the new media signal a shift towards 'democratization', or perhaps 'Westernization', as a result of what is unproblematically labeled 'globalization' (à la *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman). This mainstream, and simplistic, approach understands the shifting media landscape in the Arab world as part and parcel of the larger process of media globalization. Paradoxes – such as Al Manar propaganda on the one side and semi-nude pop stars on the other – are framed as having to do with the impacts of globalization. In the case of pop artists such as Haifa and Ruby, their phenomenon is understood as nothing short of the cultural imperialism rampant in the world that is leading local culture to emulate that of the West (for the controversies that surround the Egyptian pop-star Ruby, see the series of articles in *Transnational Broadcasting Studies* 14 Spring/Summer 2005). The growth of Islamic media or a strongly-Arab-based media is understood in one of two ways: either as a natural response to the economic needs of media production to become more like that of the West and using the technological forms of the West, or as a backlash against Western forms of cultural imperialism (see for example Ahmed 2002). For example, one can interpret Sami Yusuf as competing with, rather than opposing, Western popular culture: using the same means of production and marketing, and in similar public spaces. Yusuf's music provides the jingles to a number of TV advertisements, Vodaphone allows its customers across the Arab Gulf nations to download his videos for a fee on their cell phones and PDAs – thus no different in his marketing savvy than an American pop star like Britney Spears. His videos merely Islamicize the content of something that is Western in form, the music video, which 'is enough to produce an authentically Islamic object' (Pond 2006). The same can be said of Amr Khaled or Dr. Kotb. In this view, the whole of Arab TV, and the paradoxes therein,

are posited as mirroring larger struggles in the region of the impact of globalization.

Scholars of Arab TV attempt to problematize the impact of globalization in different ways. For example, Hazem Saghieh suggests that Arab TV's success is derived from its ability to fuse two dimensions of globalization: capitalist globalization in the form of communication technologies, and what he calls a 'lumpenproletarian globalization' appealing to ethnic and religious populism rife with stereotypical bigotry (as found on Al Manar, for example; Saghieh 2004). 'The result is a fascinating combination of progress and regress ... exhibitionist consumerism plus religious funda-mentalism [which is arguably ...] the worst postmodern combination' (Saghieh 2004). Saghieh further suggests that the growth of satellite TV, especially news stations such as Al Jazeera, mirrors 'the struggles of a people who are negotiating a difficult historical inheritance while painfully attempting to enter the world of globalization on their own terms' (Saghieh 2004). As such, Arab TV is underwritten within the political context of the decline, if not outright failure, of an (pan)Arab 'national liberation movement', which has today turned into an array of religious, ethnic, and sectarian factions united by nothing much more than their hostility to the Western (American) outsider. This has allowed Arab audiences and citizens to feel imaginatively bound up in a common cause, which many of the stations (Al Jazeera and Al Manar, for example) support and propagate. In similar vein, Khalil Rinnawi (2006) advocates, in a twist of Benjamin Barber's *Jihad vs. McWorld* (1995), that tensions between local tribal identities and global consumer conformity are re-imagined in a pan-Arab identity, which he dubs McArabism, and defines as a process of 'glocalization' by which a Middle East regional public sphere emerges in response to tensions between homogenizing commercial interests and ethnic sensibilities.

Transnational pan-Arab media certainly play a role in strengthening ties between Arab viewers (El-Nawawy and Iskander 2002; Rinnawi 2006) in the aftermath of the impotent pan-Arab political movement which saw its demise in 1967. But a pan-Arab 'structure of feeling' is not new; in the realm of culture, one only has to consider the widespread popularity across the Arab world of singers such as Abd Al Wahab, Farid Al Atrach, and Umm Kulthum in the 1930s and 1940s (which Andrew Hammond briefly addresses in his study of Arab pop culture including music, film, TV and theater [2007]). This pan-Arab structure of feeling is experienced today in a new manner, with new players (like women and youth who were previously excluded from public debate, even if they are now subsumed in global capitalist terms), and in a global–political context where Arabs are feeling simultaneously threatened and wooed by the West. One can also make a case for a growth in national (as opposed to pan-Arab) awareness in the sphere of Arab TV, such as in the crude jingoism of reality game shows that have contestants competing according to nationalities, whereby presumably a Syrian audience member would cheer on a Syrian

contestant, a Kuwaiti would cheer on a Kuwaiti, and so on (see Kraidy 2007 for a description of how Lebanese-Syrian nationalist hostilities manifested themselves in particular *Star Academy* series during heightened political tensions between the two nations). From this perspective, whether in news or in music videos, Arab TV articulates the sense of loss and failure of the Arab world (politically, economically, in terms of civil society, gender divisions, and otherwise) and provides ways of escape from its realities.

The dichotomous and simplistic perspective espoused in mainstream American journalism for example cannot fully explain the tensions, except to say that they are either emblematic of the spread of Western media or reaction to globalization (in other words, an Arab/Islamic resistance to Westernization). Nor does this argument problematize the 'worst post-modern combination' referred to by Saghieh or question whether this is specific to the region or is simply a global condition: is it, as Kai Hafez (2007) argues an example of a 'new regionalism' that is 'quite impervious to globalization' (p. 81)?

No doubt, the increase of Arab media is indicative and reflective of the process of media globalization. No doubt, some are using TV as a platform to debate, or fight, about who speaks for the Arab world, and who speaks for Islam. Of course, some of these trends have to do with an increasing freedom of expression, some with the desire to make money and recognize media as an arena from which to get rich (whether one is a TV station owner, a pop star or an Islamic reverend). As such, the more theoretically nuanced works by Naomi Sakr (2001, 2007a, 2007b), Tarik Sabry (2005, 2007), Basyouni Hamada (2004), and Kai Hafez (2001, 2007) are welcomed contributions to the discussion about how we are to complicate our understanding of media and globalization – in the Arab world and elsewhere.

There are also a number of important studies on the national structures and regulatory policies that highlight some of the fundamental differences between Arab nations and at the same time complicate the narrative of the national. Nabil Dajani (1992, 2001) and Marwan Kraidy (1998) explain the unique experience of the Civil War period and post-war years in Lebanon when dozens of illegal channels began to broadcast, eventually becoming legal and regionally popular satellite channels. A similarly chaotic televisual landscape arose in the Palestinian Territories after the 1993 peace agreements (although never to be viewed outside the West Bank and the Gaza Strip), as described by Jamal (2005) and Tawil-Souri (2007), lending both scholars the possibility of problematizing the nation-state as an inherent label in the logic guiding the study of media globalization. The post-2003 Iraqi television landscape – revealing the problems of (re)creating a broad-casting system and policy structure while under military occupation – is the focus of a study by Monroe Price et al. (2007). There are also studies on Egyptian television that do not fall into the trap of 'essentializing' actions in the media landscape in terms of an abstract model composed of patterns determined by an economic logic of simple capitalism that can

lead only to contradiction, crisis, and conflict, or to emulation and sub-sumption, such as pre-satellite TV scholarship by Karen Dajani (1980) and James Napoli et al. (1995), as well as recent work by Issandr El Amrani (2006). Such works, although focused on specific national contexts, adequately theorize the role of the nation-state (especially in the realm of policy) in the face of globalization that moves beyond the journalistic accounts that portray media globalization in the Arab world as an oppositional binary effect.

Public sphere

Perhaps the fastest growing body of work that exists about Arab media concerns itself with the question of whether Arab satellite television (and 'new media' more generally) is the new public sphere whose existence can or will lead to increased democratization. Concerns about a new Arab public sphere are often framed around whether or not Al Jazeera – the most well known station outside the region, as well as the most watched station in many Arab countries – is at the forefront of this political–social change. Any overview of Arab television scholarship must include the growing body of literature that focuses on the landmark 24-h news channel launched in 1996. As with scholars dealing with the notion of globalization above, those concerned with Al Jazeera are also in conversation with Western journalistic and government-funded researchers looking for the simple, and at times Orientalist/racist, answer to 'what is the impact of pan-Arab satellite TV on politics – both in the Arab world and in the West?' (Alterman 1998; Nawar 2007; Zednick 2002).

Here, the mainstream perspective echoes the familiar rhetoric of incompatibility based on essentialized views of culture and 'civilization'. From this perspective, what is happening on Arab screens is indicative of the collision of cultures, with the call that Arabs, or Muslims, need to reconcile (superior) Western traditions (of media production, democracy, public sphere, rational thought, human rights, women's rights, etc.) with indigenous values. Indeed, this paradigm often uses the terms 'Arabs' and 'Muslims' interchangeably and, by conflating the two, inaccurately essentializes both and fails to recognize their heterogeneity.

A slightly more refined argument is that the increase in 'traditionalism' or intensification of Islamic or ethno-national Arab media production and consumption is *correlated* with globalization, as Paul Lubeck states in the following: 'globalization, quite ironically, stimulates a militant reactive ethno-nationalist opposition to the hegemonic state responsible for the management of global structures (i.e. the USA)' (Lubeck 2000, 8) – a similar argument made by Barber (1995) generally, and by Rinnawi (2006) about Arab TV specifically. Thus, Amr Khaled's preachings, Sami Yusuf's Muslim pop songs, Dr. Kotb's sex-meets-Quran talk show, and news propaganda on Al Manar are understood as regional resistance to globalization and its

failures to locally fulfill the Enlightenment project of increasing secularism, rationality, and evolutionary progress. All of these arguments are firmly rooted in the belief that there is serious incommensurability of imagined or actual 'Islamic ways of life' ('Islamic values' or 'Arab cultural values') with Western norms. We are confronted here with the familiar Huntingtonian (1993) assumption and discourse about Islam's notorious rigidity in the face of change, whereby Islam is charged of being a 'backward, vestigial, reactionary [belief] inspired by 7th century patriarchal values' (Lubeck 2000, 4). Again, here Islam speaks for Arab – as if the two are synonymous. Social change (whether through media technologies or otherwise) remains an exogenous force to which Arabs ought to accommodate, or, allegedly, in the case of Islamists, to resist. Accordingly, the main predicament faced by Muslims/Arabs is whether they can appropriate modernity, or its tools, while rejecting the world view related to it. Thus, we are confronted with a dilemma: of a clash of civilizations manifesting itself in the cultural realm that needs to be resolved (and we all know in what direction the 'preferred' resolution ought to go).

This view analyzes the media as though the Arab world were a coherent world, a closed system driven by a uniform underlying logic. Rather than tell us anything interesting about the Arab world, and the plurality of real tendencies among Arabs of diverse backgrounds and experiences, it reveals the preoccupations of the 'scholar' and the prevailing paranoia and 'superiority complex' within Western governmental circles. The critical and theoretically grounded scholarship about Arab TV challenges this dualistic, simplistic, and heterogeneous view of the Islamic/Arab world as somehow in a 'clash' with the West, by bringing to the fore not only the range of programming and audience responses that are complex and contradictory, but also by complicating media theories.

Embedded in this mainstream view is the modernization mantra that media are the 'magic multipliers' that can inevitably propel a society, *any* society, towards 'modernization' (see Lerner 1958). Here, questions focus on whether and how the media are pushing the political realm towards more democratization, or in the economic realm towards more neo-liberal development. Are media leading to a secularization and democratization of a backwards/'religious' society? Or, put another way, is the increase in 'Muslim media' signaling the trend towards a more closed, anti-modern, or anti-Western society? As such, there seems to be utter confusion as to why a Western-style 'modernization' has not happened given the plethora of Western-like programs on Arab television (see, e.g., Al-Obaida 2003).

Within this research framework, questions are focused on the harmful impact of certain kinds of programs, and in some cases, certain channels, especially Al Jazeera (and more recently, Al Manar – for an example of the latter, see Kalb and Saivetz 2007). The United States Institute of Peace (2005), for example, published its findings that pan–Arab satellite channels such as Al Jazeera are guilty of: 'providing provocative editorials;' broadcasting

reports that are 'inflammatory,' such as news that is 'violent and emotive' reducing coverage (especially of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the war in Iraq) to 'scenes of carnage [that] are used to emotionalize rather than to analyze the cause;' thus constructing 'a fabricated reality' whose 'distortion' is 'exaggerated.' In short, pan-Arab media is 'suspect, if not a genuine danger to the West,' broadcasting 'lies' that are 'predictably unfriendly to the United States.' Here, research echoes the US government's fears about Al Jazeera, and Arab media more generally, promoting 'pro-Arab' (rather than 'pro-American') perspectives, particularly intensified since the 2003 US war in Iraq.

One can categorize critical scholarship about Al Jazeera into three threads, all implicitly or explicitly responding to the simplistic mainstream view of a 'clash of civilizations', analyzing the following: first, Al Jazeera's political (or 'civilizational' to follow Huntington) allegiance in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, discussed in Miles (2005), Rushing (2007), Seib (2005), and Lynch (2006) – although the authors do not themselves believe in a 'clash', they provide convincing counter-argument to the post-911 label of Al Jazeera being 'Bin Laden's mouthpiece'; second, whether and how Al Jazeera is a catalyst and forum for a 'new' public sphere (most notably Rinnawi 2006, and Lynch 2006); and third, Al Jazeera's credibility as a 'Westernized' or 'global' media channel (El-Nawawy and Iskander 2002; Zayani 2005; Zayani and Sahraoui 2007), or more critically, whether a pan-Arab channel can truly be considered 'global' (Sabry 2005). Hugh Miles' *Al-Jazeera* (2005) and Josh Rushing's *Mission Al Jazeera* (2007) are 'insider' accounts of the station's history and organization; although Faisal Al-Kasim (1999), host of the widely popular and studied Al Jazeera talk show, *The Opposite Direction*, provides his own views on the show's regional impact. There is an assumption in the mainstream perspective, for example, that the heated debates aired on Al Jazeera's talk shows, such as *The Opposite Direction*, will lead to increased democratization in the political sphere – the logic assumes that because people are 'learning' to listen to debates and hear dissent on television, they will want to do so in the realm of real politics. This echoes US government and policy interests. One may as well think of these studies as extensions of the Council for Foreign Relations research agenda, where the reincarnations of the Voice of America into Al Hurra TV and Sawa Radio symbolize the assumption that media is able to directly influence, and change, the Arab towards Western-style democratization, or at the least towards seeing the United States in a more favorable eye. Such concerns are obviously Orientalist, reductionist, and are administratively-led research questions, rather than 'humanist' attempts of understanding socio-cultural shifts. From a different political perspective, Marc Lynch (2006) argues that political talk shows help build the foundations of a pluralistic society by demonstrating the legitimacy of disagreement, as found on the heated debates on Al Jazeera's *The Opposite Direction*, although Lynch hints at the need for concomitant on-the-ground changes in political organizations

and transformations. Mary Ann Tétreault (2003) explains how it is that despite expanded access to television channels and wide-ranging political opinions among Kuwaiti citizens, a more engaged (or perhaps enraged) Kuwaiti citizenry isn't demonstrating on the streets. As Lynch and Tétreault begin to argue, the process of democratization, as the 'creation' of a public sphere, is much more complex than hoping for media to directly impact politics, but a dialectical, nuanced and tenuous relationship in which all spheres are in constant flux – media, technological, political, economic, religious, and otherwise. Additionally, while Sakr's (2001, 2007a, 2007b) and Karam's (2007) research are not solely focused on Al Jazeera, their contributions provide room for audience agency, for contextual analysis, for a consideration of economic and political conditions on the ground concurrent with and behind the scenes of Al Jazeera's messages.

Conclusion: Towards new paradigms

The Arab world is experiencing media growth and transformations that signal contradictory trends and a shifting cultural landscape. But these shifts are more profound than just a facet of the economic logic of media globalization, certainly more meaningful than a clash of civilizations, and also more complicated than a struggle over reconciling Western conceptions of a public sphere with indigenous values – this is as true for Arab media as it is for Latin American, African, or Asian.

The burgeoning scholarship about Arab television, whether it is aiming to reconceptualize the notion of 'globalization' or of the 'public sphere' critiques such views for their myopia: submerged in an oppositional framework, the latter remain incapable of concluding anything more than summoning the Arab world to marry these irreconcilable differences in order to 'move forward'. The critical scholarship recognizes the multifariousness of programs and viewpoints available on TV, the polysemic nature of media interpretation, and the necessity of connecting shifts in media to real shifts on the ground (whether in harmful US involvement in the region, in authoritarian regimes continuing their hegemonic hold over oppositional groups, or the rise of those oppositional viewpoints in various locales and among different people), telling us interesting stories not only about what is on TV, but about contemporary Arab society and politics. Some of the scholars mentioned above, who take a critical, grounded, contextualized analysis of Arab media are gaining ground (most notably Armbrust 1996, 2000, 2006; Sabry 2005, 2007; Sakr 2007b; Stein and Swedenburg 2005), along with journals such as *Arab Media & Society* and the soon-to-be-launched *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication*. Here, research focuses on some of the following issues (by no means exhaustive): the relationship between identity formation and/or national consciousness and media use; the dialectics between nationalism, modernity and Arab classicism; popular culture as sites of contestation; the connection

between popular culture and questions of power and politics; the balance between conservative nationalist imagery and a modernist ethic; the shifting politics of media products through a historical (or at times ethnographic) perspective; tensions between consumer desires and the place of Islam; gender and social inequalities; how popular culture creates news scales of communication and new dimensions of identity; the long-standing trans-national aspects of Arab societies (through the lens of colonialism and post-colonialism) that challenge assumptions about the region's isolation or backwardness in its relation to the West; the ways in which the cultural terrain articulates with broader social forces and political economic processes.

Moreover, while media ethnographies of Arab audiences have been slow to develop, there are a few scholars who have conducted in-depth studies of how Arab audiences interact with TV content, as well as how Arab TV producers imagine their social/political roles. The most notable of these are by Walter Armbrust (1996, 2000, 2006) and Lila Abu-Lughod (1993, 1995, 2005). Abu-Lughod's multi-sited ethnography, *Dramas of Nationhood* (2005), in which she problematizes the role of the Egyptian serial drama as consumed by different sets of female audiences in Egypt was perhaps the first of its kind in providing a 'thick description' of both audience members and television producers and their problematic relationship to the imagined Egyptian nation. Christa Salamandra's work (1998, 2005) analyzes Syrian drama series producers' ambivalence during a period of a local and global socialist demise, and promise of national democracy. Recent works by emerging scholars also show promise of a new turn in Arab media studies of ethnographies with audience members and media producers, such as Dina Matar's (2007b) research on diasporic Palestinian viewers in Britain, and Amahl Bishara's (2006) analysis of Palestinian journalists, both of which also problematize the spatial dimension of the 'Arab' (or in their case specifically Palestinian) world. Finally, Imad Karam's (2007) research engages with the (often exclusionary) impact of pan-Arab satellite TV on the largest segment of the Arab population: the youth.

What makes this scholarship critical is its recognition that academic inquiry into Arab television is not altogether new, since many previous scholars have studied different Arab media forms (music, film, theater, etc.) and their contradictory roles in society, politics, religion, economic processes, and cultural identity. What this speaks to is the necessity of scholarship to historically ground analysis and recognize that both pan-Arab satellite TV and scholarship thereof are not born out of a vacuum, but of a long tradition of cultural expression and academic inquiry dialectically related to social and political change.

Short Biography

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