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Reality Television and Arab Politics

Contention in Public Life

What does it mean to be modern outside the West? Based on a wealth of primary data collected during five years, *Reality Television and Arab Politics* analyzes how reality television stirred an explosive mix of religion, politics, and sexuality, fueling heated polemics over cultural authenticity, gender relations, and political participation in the Arab world. The controversies, Marwan M. Kraidy argues, are best understood as a social laboratory in which actors experiment with various forms of modernity, continuing a long-standing Arab preoccupation with specifying terms of engagement with Western modernity. Women and youth take center stage in this process. Against the backdrop of dramatic upheaval in the Middle East, this book challenges the notion of a monolithic "Arab Street" and offers an original perspective on Arab media, shifting attention away from a narrow focus on al-Jazeera and toward a vibrant media sphere that compels broad popular engagement and contentious political performance.

Marwan M. Kraidy is Associate Professor of Communication at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania. Previously a Fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars and Director of the Arab Media and Public Life (AMPLE) project, Kraidy has authored *Hybridity, or the Cultural Logic of Globalization* (2005), and coedited *Global Media Studies: Ethnographic Perspectives* (2003). He has written widely and contributed frequently to media discussions of Arab media and global communication, mostly on National Public Radio.

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Politics and relations among individuals in societies across the world are being transformed by new technologies for targeting individuals and sophisticated methods for shaping personalized messages. The new technologies challenge boundaries of many kinds – between news, information, entertainment, and advertising; between media, with the arrival of the World Wide Web; and even between nations. Communication, Society and Politics probes the political and social impacts of these new communication systems in national, comparative, and global perspective.

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Reality and the representation of reality are always far apart. But the gap between the two reaches a breaking point when a society experiences a deep crisis in which individuals don't have enough time to formulate discourses to explain to themselves what they are doing.

Fatima Mernissi (1987, x)

If we, in late modernity, have an idea of reality, it cannot be understood as the objectives given lying beneath, or beyond, the images we receive of it from our media. How and where could we arrive at such a reality "in itself"? For us, reality is rather the result of the intersection . . . of a multiplicity of images, interpretations and reconstructions circulated by the media in competition with one another and without any "central" coordination.

Giannni Vattimo (1992, 7)

Even if any terminology is a reflection of reality, by its very nature as a terminology it must be a selection of reality, and to this extent it must function also as a deflection of reality.

Kenneth Burke (1970, 45)

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Acknowledgments

I was fortunate to witness as a teenager in the 1980s the explosion of privately owned media in wartime Lebanon, and to come of age in the 1990s with what has become known as the "Arab media revolution." It is thanks to those firsthand experiences that I began exploring Arab television as a social and political force, and an accounting of everyone who has contributed in some way to my understanding of this puzzling world is simply impossible. This book bears the imprint of numerous friends, colleagues, family members, students, teachers, intellectuals, journalists, directors, producers, and critics who inhabit the various communities and institutions through which I have been fortunate to pass. Without the many media workers throughout the Arab world who have shared their experiences, frustrations, and aspirations, some of whom must remain anonymous, this book would simply not exist. I am grateful to all.

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Preface

On a warm summer evening, making our way up a narrow street, we left behind the fishermen's harbor of the ancient city of Byblos, Lebanon. I had been in the country for about two months, since early April 2004, doing research on what I initially conceived as a study of the overlaps between popular culture and politics in the Arab world, guided as much by a long-standing conceptual interest in the issue as by my mounting frustration with the obsession with al-Jazeera as a stand-in for Arab media. We were in Byblos to see my brother giving a piano concert in the old Saint Jean Marc church up the street. Suddenly, my two-year-old son leapt onto the street.

"Bruno!" I called, panicked by the sight of my toddler jumping onto a street that had a fair amount of car traffic. As I hauled my son back to safety, we were quickly surrounded by a group of teenagers, mostly girls, some smiling, others giggling, and several excitedly repeating "Esmo Bruno? Esmo Bruno!" (His name is Bruno? His name is Bruno!) Among them were several school girls wearing the veil, on a school trip from the Northern city of Tripoli to visit Byblos's ancient ruins; some teenage tourists in jeans, t-shirts, and tank tops; and a few local boys and girls stepping out from the souvenir stores and eateries dotting the area. The name Bruno is uncommon though not unheard of in Lebanon. What was it about that name that piqued the interest of these youngsters?

Bruno, they explained to me, was a Lebanese contestant on *Star Academy,* a bilingual (Arabic and French), pelvis-rotating heartthrob, whose popularity turned out to be short lived when viewers voted him out of the show early on. I had watched a few episodes of *Star Academy*, taking detailed notes for what I thought would become one chapter in my book about entertainment media and Arab politics. The encounter on the street of Byblos triggered a chain of ideas and field observations

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that led me to scrutinize the reality TV fever as it gripped one Arab society after another, and to investigate the social and political implications of the phenomenon.

The timing of the Byblos incident was propitious, as I was about to embark on a two-week trip to Dubai for fieldwork in Dubai Media City and interviews with managers, producers, directors, journalists, and corporate analysts. After several years doing extensive research in several countries, viewing a dizzying amount of Arab reality TV shows, analyzing hundreds of newspaper columns, and poring over institutional histories, I realized that I was on to something more far-reaching than I had imagined: by stirring a volatile mix of politics, religion, business, and gender, the Arab polemics over *al-Ra'is* (Big Brother), *Superstar*, and *Star Academy* crystallized epochal debates about what it meant to be modern in the Arab world. This led me to recast *Reality Television and Arab Politics* as an attempt, however limited, to contribute to what the philosopher Charles Taylor called "perhaps the most important task of social sciences in our day: understanding the full gamut of alternative modernities which are in the making in different parts of the world."[1]

[1] Taylor, C. (1999). "Two Theories of Modernity," *Public Culture* 11 (9): 165.

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