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978-0-521-76919-8 - Reality Television and Arab Politics: Contention in Public Life

Marwan M. Kraidy

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Introduction: Beyond al-Jazeera

On March 3, 2004, the journalist Ahmad Mansour introduced an episode of *Bila Hudud (No Boundaries)*, a widely followed talk show on al-Jazeera:

Though the West has made great strides in many fields and human rights . . . Arabs have specialized in mimicking the worst the West has to offer. As soon as there is a strange or deviant fad in food, drink, fashion, triviality and folly, Arabs rush madly upon it, imitating it blindly and ignorantly. The most prominent symptom [of this imitation] is the proliferation of . . . television programs copied from European television and based on degeneration, nudity, gyrating, triviality, void, voyeurism, the end of privacy and the dissemination of Western social ills under the heading of reality TV. This kind of program has infested Arab television as channels compete to acquire reality TV formats, copy them for Arab youth, and mobilize millions of viewers to follow who does what and who says what, thus toppling and destroying the values, culture, civilization and identity of Arab society.¹

The episode, entitled “Mimicking Western Programs and Imposing Them on Arabs,” aired three days after the Saudi-owned Middle East Broadcasting Center (MBC) shut down *al-Ra’is*, the Arabic version of *Big Brother*, and less than three months after the Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation (LBC) aired the first episode of *Star Academy*. Reaching two dozen Arab countries by satellite, these reality shows instigated a firestorm of contention over politics, commerce, religion, and sexuality.

¹ Mimicking Western Programs and Imposing Them on Arabs, Episode 1. (March 3, 2004). *Bila Hudud* (Ahmad Mansour, Host). Doha, Qatar: al-Jazeera. Mansour is known for sympathizing with the Muslim Brotherhood.

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[More information](#)

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After years of watching pugilistic talk shows on al-Jazeera, Arab viewers were turning in droves to new and exciting reality TV (Arabic: *telfizion al-waqi'*) programs served up by entertainment channels, stirring wide-ranging controversies – some of which Mansour captured in his stinging indictment – and confirming Jon Alterman's quip that "If al-Jazeera indicates that news can be entertainment, LBC indicates that entertainment can be news."²

Reality Television and Arab Politics: Contention in Public Life tells the fascinating story of the Arab reality TV controversies, a political earthquake whose shockwaves rumbled from epicenters in Beirut and Dubai all the way to Algeria, Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Syria, and whose aftershocks can be felt to this day. What these pan-Arab polemics call for is nothing short of a shift in how we understand the social and political impact of Arab media, a pressing issue since the attacks of September 11, 2001. Looking at the many books published heretofore about Arab television, one is struck by an obsessive focus on al-Jazeera, the Qatari network critical of U.S. policies in the Middle East.³ Broadcasting videotaped messages by Osama Bin Laden made al-Jazeera infamous, but assuming that a single telecaster shapes Arab "hearts and minds" discounts the vibrancy of Arab media and the complexity of their effects. For a time, this book will demonstrate, popularity and controversy made reality TV as consequential as explicitly political programs: In 2004 *Star Academy* captured the largest audience in pan-Arab television history, reaching up to 80 percent of viewers in some countries. Unlike the predominantly adult male audience of news and current affairs, Arab entertainment television attracts a large and diverse audience that includes women and youth. Reality TV has sparked intense debates about the role of Islam in public life, Western cultural influence, gender relations, and political participation, all hot-button issues that Arabs discuss passionately in private, and increasingly in public. Though Latin American *telenovelas*, Egyptian melodramas, and

² Alterman, J. (1998). *New Media, New Politics?* Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 24.

³ See, e.g., El-Nawawy, M. and Iskandar, A. (2003). *Al-Jazeera: Inside the Arab News Network that Rattles Governments and Redefines Modern Journalism*. Boulder, CO: Westview; Lynch, M. (2005). *Voices of the New Arab Public*. New York: Columbia University Press; Miles, H. (2005). *Al-Jazeera: How Arab TV News Challenges America*. New York: Grove; Zayani, M. and Sahraoui, S. (2007). *The Culture of Al-Jazeera*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company; Lamoum, O. (2004). *Al-Jazira: Miroir rebelle et ambigu du monde arabe*. Paris: La Découverte; al-Zaidi, M. (2003). *The Al-Jazeera Channel: Breaking Taboos in the Arabic Media Space*. Beirut: Dar-al-Tali'a [Arabic].

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION: BEYOND AL-JAZEERA

televised Hindu epics have generated national debates, Arab reality TV is so controversial that it has triggered street riots, contributed to high-level political resignations, compelled clerics to issue hostile *fatwas*, and fanned transnational media wars. To elucidate these compelling events, this book draws on a rich combination of hitherto unexamined visual, textual, and ethnographic sources collected during extensive fieldwork in Beirut, Dubai, and Kuwait, and also in London, Paris, and Washington, D.C., where many Arab journalists and intellectuals live. Overall, I spent more than fifteen months in the field researching this book, consisting of three major stays in the Arab world, each lasting between three and five months in 2004, 2005, and 2006, in addition to several shorter visits between 2004 and 2009, concluding with a visit to Amman, Jordan in April 2009. However, background sections of the book are also informed by research notes and interviews from the period from 1994 to 2004. In the process of researching and writing, I combed through extensive Arabic print primary sources, watched hundreds of hours of Arab television, conducted more than 120 interviews with journalists, politicians and television professionals (see List of Interviews), and drew on a broad literature from multiple disciplines and in several languages, spanning politics and popular culture, citizenship, reality TV, modernity and authenticity, gender and Islam, and Arab media and politics.

Since 2003 the reality TV controversies have captured the transformation of a protracted Arab malaise into an acute existential crisis precipitated by 9/11, the invasion of Iraq, bloodshed throughout the region, and historic Arab realignments along the U.S.-Iran contest for hegemony over the Middle East. That has been a period of collective soul-searching during which Arabs have debated norms governing their public life and grappled with shifting identities and changing values. This process is public and contentious: it arises in homes, coffeehouses, and intellectual *fora*, and unfolds on television screens, newspaper pages, the Internet, and even mobile phones. By stirring up a volatile mix of politics, religion, business, and sexuality, reality TV has compelled more Arabs to join heated deliberations over long-standing and ponderous issues: Why are Arab states impotent to check Western power? Should Arabs and Muslims identify with their brethren across the region, with their coreligionists across the world, or rather, should they be loyal to modern nation-states? What is the role of religion in matters of state? To what extent should clerics influence politics and public life? How best to ward off Western cultural influence? Is

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

REALITY TELEVISION AND ARAB POLITICS

commercial television promoting women's emancipation, or is it turning them into erotic commodities? What is the proper scope of relations between men and women? Where should we draw the boundary between private life and the public sphere? Should we purge the media from foreign values, or should we rather provide indigenous alternatives to Western popular culture? Do Arab media reflect Arab reality, or do they represent foreign attempts to define a new reality? Is there one unified "Arab reality"?

ELABORATING ARAB MODERNITY

Though reality TV did not singlehandedly trigger these polemics, it extended their scale, widened their scope, and broadened their reach. Analyzing these debates allows us to understand the tensions stirring the Arab world and to grasp corresponding changes in social and political relations. At the heart of the controversy, this book will show, is a radical transformation of the ways in which individuals, institutions, and nations compete to define reality. This occurs in the context of a historical struggle to specify the terms of engagement with Western modernity, a litigious and abiding Arab preoccupation since the second part of the nineteenth century.⁴ By altering the dynamic between private selves and public life, the reality TV quarrels ushered in new ways of using public space; by compelling Arabs to contemplate the implications of adapting Western programs carrying "foreign" values and images, the debate opened to scrutiny the ways in which Western modernity is selectively adapted in Arab societies. States, political movements, clergies, media institutions, journalists, and individuals contributed to this wide-ranging discussion.

The polemic over how to adapt Western modernity turns public space into a battlefield of beliefs and values. The creation of European modernity, wrote the political theorist Timothy Mitchell, is based on

⁴ For English-language sources, see al-Azmeh, A. (1993). *Islams and Modernities*. London: Verso; and Hourani, A. (1983). *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age: 1789–1939*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Arabic-language sources include 'Abdullatif, K. (1999). *Modernity and History: A Critical Dialogue with Some Questions in Arab Thought*. Casablanca: Afriqia al-Sharq; al-Ghaddhami, M. (2005). *The Tale of Modernity in Saudi Arabia*. Beirut and Casablanca: Arab Cultural Centre; Belqiz, A. (2007) *The Arabs and Modernity: A Study in the Writings of the Modernists*. Beirut: Center for Arab Unity Studies; and Bennis, M. (2004). *Fractured Modernity*. Casablanca: Toubqal Press.

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION: BEYOND AL-JAZEERA

“the way in which the modern is staged as representation.”⁵ Producing acute conflict over representation, the reality TV controversies highlight contrary views of the Arab experience with *al-hadatha* – modernity. What it means to “be modern” in the Arab context has been vigorously contested since the 1850s, but the debate took on a renewed poignancy in the 1990s with the rise of pan-Arab commercial television and its growing linkages to the global media industries. Despite countless debates over its definition, it is generally agreed that modernity entails self-criticism through which societies constantly renew themselves. As the sociologist Anthony Giddens put it, modernity “effectively involves the institutionalization of doubt.”⁶ On the surface, modernity presents the Arab world with a challenge. Can Arab societies, where Islam permeates social, cultural, and political life, follow the modern path of decreasing the role of religion in public life? The answer may be “no,” if we follow Giddens who writes that modernity is “manifestly incompatible with religion as a pervasive influence upon day-to-day life.”⁷ But the answer could be “yes” according to scholars who have argued that modernity has theological origins, religious speech enabled early European modernity, there are different kinds of modernity, and more specifically, media usage helped Arab and Muslim communities to accommodate modernity without forsaking their heritage.⁸ The commotion over reality TV played up tensions associated with modernity – the relation between religion and the state, development of representative forms of governance, rise of nationalism, and conflict over gender roles.⁹

The media have historically played a crucial role in Arab experiences with modernity. A recurrent story in Albert Hourani’s classic *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age: 1798–1939* is the importance of newspapers as platforms for nineteenth-century Arab and Muslim reformers advocating

⁵ Mitchell, T. (2000). *Questions of Modernity*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 16.

⁶ Giddens, A. (1990). *The Consequences of Modernity*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 176.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁸ See, e.g., Cole, J. (1999). *Modernity at the Millenium*. New York: Columbia University Press; Gillespie, M. A. (2008). *The Theological Origins of Modernity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Adelhah, F. (2000). *Being Modern in Iran*. New York: Columbia University Press; Eickelman, D. (1998). “Inside the Islamic Reformation,” *Wilson Quarterly* 22 (1): 80–9; al-Azmeh, A. (1993). *Islams and Modernities*, London: Verso; Mitchell, 2000; Deeb, L. (2006). *An Enchanted Modern*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press; Blanks, J. (2001). *Mullahs on the Mainframe*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

⁹ See Cole, 1999.

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

REALITY TELEVISION AND ARAB POLITICS

selective adoptions from Western modernity and focusing on the question, “how to become part of the modern world while remaining Muslim?”¹⁰ This trend carried over into the early twentieth century, when newspapers in Ottoman cities like Aleppo featured intense debates about what it meant to be modern.¹¹ In his book *Fractured Modernity*, the Moroccan poet Muhammad Bennis considers the Arab press to be the midwife of modernity, spreading the “alphabet of light” to the Arab population.¹² Arab modernizers found in the press an effective platform for their ideas, especially with the development of the newspaper column. Writing about his country, the Saudi literary and social critic ‘Abdallah al-Ghaddhami argues that the appearance of the newspaper column in the 1950s constituted

a modal change in the individual’s position towards himself and in his relation to the world. The individual used to be a cell in a relationship deferring speech to the lord of the people who did not require evidence to back what he said. But in the column the individual came to change the ways of expression and topple the boundaries of the permissible. . . . The column [is] a foundation for the constitution of an independent, individual opinion.¹³

The Saudi modernity wars that lasted from 1985 to 1995, like the polemic over *Star Academy* dissected in Chapter 4, were waged primarily in op-ed columns in the Saudi press.¹⁴ Likewise, in Egypt, Lebanon, and Morocco, media institutions played a crucial role in elaborating local versions of modernity.¹⁵ In Egypt, as the anthropologist Walter Armbrust has shown, television drama since the 1970s has presented “modern” characters that are “educated, sophisticated, worldly, and at

¹⁰ Hourani, 1983, 95.

¹¹ Watenpaugh, K. D. (2006). *Being Modern in the Middle East: Revolution, Nationalism, Colonialism, and the Arab Middle Class*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

¹² Bennis, 2004, 121.

¹³ al-Ghaddhami, 2005, 126.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Abu-Lughod, L. (2005). *Dramas of Nationhood*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Armbrust, W. (1996). *Mass Culture and Modernism in Egypt*, Cambridge University Press; Hirschkind, C. (2006). *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics*. New York: Columbia University Press; Kraidy, M. M. (1999). “The Global, the Local, and the Hybrid: A Native Ethnography of Glocalization,” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 16 (4): 458–78; Sabry, T. (2005). “The Day Moroccans Gave Up Couscous for Satellites: Global TV, Structures of Feeling, and Mental Emigration,” *Transnational Broadcasting Studies* 14, <http://www.tbsjournal.com/Archives/Spring05/sabry.html> (accessed December 30, 2005).

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION: BEYOND AL-JAZEERA

the same time clearly tied with *asala* (authenticity),” underscoring an Egyptian modernity that seeks national renewal and at the same time emphasizes continuity with the past.¹⁶ In a similar vein, the anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod showed that since the beginning of Egypt’s *infatih* (open-door economic policies), television has promoted consumption while simultaneously warning against the dangers of consumerism. Following Peter Brook’s assertion in *The Melodramatic Imagination* that melodrama was “the central fact of the modern sensibility,”¹⁷ Abu-Lughod argues that television drama is one of several “technologies of modern self-making” in Egypt because it foments a distinct kind of individual emotionality.¹⁸ By carrying conversations about the nation’s relation to the world and heightening viewers’ subjectivity, television hosts a national debate about modernity and authenticity.

Current reality TV polemics, therefore, continue historical trends; they also constitute a qualitative leap: Though, as we shall see, Arab newspaper columnists played a crucial role in connecting the reality TV battles to wider themes of political participation, social justice, and individual emancipation, Arab media today are not merely a carrier of debate. By virtue of the disputable entertainment it broadcasts, television is an important catalyst for broad-ranging, increasingly public, and often-heated discussions of modernity. This book focuses on how reality TV has sparked debates on vital social and political issues, and how it has been appropriated by various actors as a language of contestation. Further, unlike Saudi modernity wars or Egyptian concerns about authenticity, both national debates, the subject of this book is transnational, involving the traffic of ideas and controversies within and among twenty-two Arabic-speaking countries in addition to the global Arab diaspora.

Though reality TV generated controversy in many countries including Australia, Germany, Malawi, Turkey, and France (see Chapter 1),¹⁹

¹⁶ Armbrust, 1996, 22.

¹⁷ Brooks, P. (1976). *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

¹⁸ Abu-Lughod, 2005, 113. The author argues that Egyptian television serials contribute to a modernist project by shaping national political and social debates and by promoting a “distinctive configuration of narrative and emotionality” (113).

¹⁹ See the collection Mathjis, E. and Jones, J., eds. (2004). *Big Brother International: Formats, Critics and Publics*. London: Wallflower Press. For the intellectual debates reality TV fomented in France, see Schneidermann, D. (2004). *Le cauchemar médiatique*. Paris: Denel/Folio documents; Le Guay, D. (2005). *L’empire de la télé-réalité, ou comment accroître le “temps de cerveau humain disponible.”* Paris: Presses de la Renaissance.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

REALITY TELEVISION AND ARAB POLITICS

the upheaval in the Arab world has been all-encompassing and enduring, touching on a broad spectrum of issues and linking to momentous geopolitical crises. However, the distinct form the controversy took in each Arab country suggests that modernity comes in multiple and sometimes contradictory forms. Debates over the meaning of modernity are heated in the non-West because “modernity” conjures up social progress, economic growth, individual emancipation, or cultural modernism, or, alternatively, cultural decline, loss of authenticity, and economic dependency. Complicating these discussions is the widespread belief that modernity is incapable of shedding its Western ethos. Nonetheless, if modernity involves what the philosopher Charles Taylor called “the coming to be of new kinds of public space”²⁰ then impassioned debates about reality TV constitute crucial episodes of Arab engagement with modernity. It would be too easy to conceive of the Arab reality TV debate as a clash between tradition and modernity. Rather, under the irresistible pull of Western modernity, societies search for what Taylor dubbed “creative adaptation”²¹ to adopt constituents of modernity. Though broadly sympathetic to the multiple modernities literature,²² like Mitchell, I am aware of modernity’s insistent claim to universality and its unavoidable linkages to the West. Through a critical engagement with theories of modernity, this book aims to explicate anew how the struggle between rival versions of modernity – what the philosopher Leszek Kolakowski called modernity’s “endless trial”²³ – unfolds.

TELEVISION’S NEW ECONOMIC MODEL

Arab reality TV presents a fascinating case of creative adaptation. Widespread format adaptation reflects a growing integration of Arab television in the global media industry, visible in multimedia convergence, intense competition among four hundred and seventy Arabic-language

²⁰ Taylor, C. (1999). “Two Theories of Modernity,” *Public Culture* 11 (9): 153–74.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 163.

²² Gaonkar, D. P. (1999). “On Alternative Modernities,” *Public Culture* 11 (1): 1–18; Hervieu-Léger, D. (2003). “Pour une sociologie des ‘modernités religieuses multiples’: une autre approche de la ‘religion invisible’ des sociétés européennes,” *Social Compass* 50 (3): 287–95; Kaya, I. (2004). “Modernity, Openness, Interpretation: A Perspective on Multiple Modernities,” *Social Science Information* 43 (1): 35–47; Mitchell, 2000; Taylor, 1999.

²³ Kolakowski, L. (1990). *Modernity on Endless Trial*. S. Czerniawski, W. Freis, and A. Kolakowska, trans. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Cambridge University Press

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Marwan M. Kraidy

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION: BEYOND AL-JAZEERA

satcasters, and a trend toward specialization and niche markets.²⁴ The designation “reality TV” refers to various talent and game shows that are unscripted, feature primarily amateurs, and involve viewer participation through voting for contestants. Two European companies, Endemol in Holland and Fremantle Media in Britain, dominate global “formats,” program recipes stipulating creative, technical, and dramatic components, sold worldwide and culturally adapted to local audiences. LBC’s *Star Academy* is a knockoff of the identically named French show, and *Superstar*, aired by Beirut-based Future TV, is the Arabic version of *Pop Idol*. Because adapting a format is less risky than creating a brand-new program, Arab producers and directors repeatedly told me that reality TV had changed the way they worked.²⁵ “It used to be that we aimed to create the next great program; now we compete to adapt the next great format,” a director told me in Dubai, succinctly describing the shift from original creation to inventive adaptation.²⁶

In theory, Arabic speakers constitute one of the largest language-based audiences in the world, roughly the size of the U.S. audience. In reality, various Arabic accents, uneven socioeconomic levels with wealth concentrated in the Gulf states, and widespread signal piracy undercut the commercial viability of Arab television.²⁷ The state of corporate audience research compounds the challenges mentioned in the preceding text. Some companies, such as the Pan-Arab Research Center (PARC) in Dubai and IPSOS-STAT in Beirut and Dubai, have achieved a measure of respectability within the media industry, but doubts linger about their reliability, especially when it comes to their major clients. Focusing extensively on oil-rich Gulf Cooperation Council countries

²⁴ Kraidy, M. M. and Khalil, J. (2007). “The Middle East: Transnational Arab Television,” in *The Media Globe: Trends in International Mass Media*, ed. L. Artz and Y. Kamalipour. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 79–98. For more details, see Kraidy, M. M. and Khalil, J. (2009, in press). *Arab Television Industries*. London: Palgrave Macmillan/British Film Institute. The number 470 was determined in April 2009 by Arab Advisors Group, author interview with Jawad Abbasi, General Manager, Arab Advisors Group, April 26, 2009, Amman, Jordan.

²⁵ Less risky does not necessarily mean less costly. See Khalil, J. (2005). “Inside Arab Reality Television: Development, Definitions and Demystification,” *Transnational Broadcasting Journal* 15, <http://www.tbsjournal.com/Archives/Fall05/khalil.html> (accessed December 30, 2005).

²⁶ See Khalil, J. (2004). “Blending In: Arab Television and the Search for Programming Ideas,” *Transnational Broadcasting Journal*, 13, <http://www.tbsjournal.com/Archives/Fall04/khalil.html> (accessed November 30, 2004).

²⁷ For a detailed discussion of these issues, see Kraidy, M. M. (2008). “The Arab Audience: From Activity to Interactivity,” in *Arab Media: Power and Weakness*, ed. K. Hafez. New York: Continuum, 77–88.

Cambridge University Press

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Marwan M. Kraidy

Excerpt

[More information](#)

REALITY TELEVISION AND ARAB POLITICS

(e.g., Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates), audience researchers are confronted with resistance grounded in privacy issues.²⁸ To be sustainable, advertising-supported media require reliable audience research, the lack of which is a major reason for low advertising spending in the Middle East and North Africa, the second lowest in the world after Sub-Saharan Africa. Total “ad spend” in 2005 was near U.S.\$5 billion, though this reflects undiscounted “rate cards” figures. The real figure according to Arab advertising mogul Antoine Choueiri was U.S.\$2 billion. Newspapers still get the lion’s share and television accounts for only 20 percent of the rate card amount.²⁹ Low advertising receipts have also compelled Arab media companies to aggressively develop new revenue streams from subsidiary rights and “value-added services” like ring tones, CDs, and DVDs, and from Short Messaging System (SMS), Multimedia Messaging System (MMS), and Interactive Video Network (IVN) applications. Pay-as-you-click interactivity is a new source of profit. In the absence of reliable knowledge of the audience, the advent of interactivity has tempered a raging debate over people meters (devices installed in private homes to monitor television use) and other audience-measurement techniques. At a time when controversy continues over whether to introduce people meters to socially conservative Gulf countries, some in the industry began to question the necessity of such a move. An executive at Omnicom Media Group (OMG) Middle East argued that:

Everyone will tell you that people meters are crucial, and that’s all good, but the issue in my opinion is that TV meters are passé, an old story. . . . We should go beyond TV meters and I think in this region we have the opportunity to go to the next stage. *It’s about doing engagement studies, how programmes are engaging with viewers – not just how long they’re spending watching them.*³⁰

The desired shift from quantitatively measuring the time spent watching television to qualitatively assessing viewers’ engagement with particular

²⁸ Author interviews with Jihad Fakhreddine, Research Manager, Pan Arab Research Center (PARC), June 1, 2004 and June 25, 2005, Dubai, UAE; Kandil, Shadi, Media Manager, IPSOS-STAT Dubai, June 2, 2004 and Director of Research and Insights, OMD, June 22, 2005, both in Dubai, UAE.

²⁹ “Choueiri: It’s Time to Raise Ad Spending” (December 3, 2006). *Campaign Middle East*.

³⁰ “We Must Go Past TV Meters, Says OMG Boss” (September 24, 2006). *Campaign Middle East*, 6, emphasis added.