

Defining Reality: Satellite Television's Reinvigoration of Arab Polities

Reality Television and Arab Politics: Contention in Public Life, by Marwan M. Kraidy. Cambridge University Press, 2010. ISBN 978-0-521-74904-6 252pp.

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Analyses of Arab media are too often limited to studies of *Al-Jazeera's* news programs, and studies of Arab politics too often ignore the influence of popular culture. Marwan Kraidy breaks both of these disciplinary trends in *Reality Television and Arab Politics* by conducting a detailed study of how reality television is reshaping public spheres in the Middle East. This book is a valuable synthesis of information from interviews with station employees, close readings of reality television shows, and analyses of news articles. More impressive than the contribution that his book represents to charting the interaction between global media flows and local cultures is the prescient nature with which he describes the political potential of the *hypermedia event* that has come to characterize the demonstrations of the Arab Spring.

Kraidy's main assertion is that by forcing public debate on controversial issues and by enlarging the number of people who participate in these debates, reality television affects politics because it has a distinct ability to agitate unstable social relations. He describes how three reality television shows, *Star Academy*, *Superstar*, and *al-Ra'is*, created controversies that were debated in local and international Arab media sources. He also shows how more formal political structures and actors became implicated in these controversies. Additionally, he analyzes how new media have changed the way that Arab polities conduct age-old debates over modernity, authenticity, nationalism, and piety.

One of the book's recurring ideas is that reality television problematizes distinctions between reality and image; pure and hybrid; and authentic and foreign. Kraidy suggests that reality based programming allows for greater contestation over who defines realities both political and cultural. Thus, reality television erodes cultural elites' ability to monopolize public spheres and causes what Kraidy calls the "chamber politics" of official governments to be infiltrated by the "street politics" of activists. He further asserts that the participatory nature of reality television allows for citizens in Arab countries to learn mobilization strategies that take advantage of digital media. His book is useful in looking at the shift in power dynamics evidenced by the successful demonstrations in the Middle East.

Kraidy demonstrates reality television's effects on Arab polities by exploring case studies in Bahrain, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Syria. He carefully explicates the transnational financial and political connections that characterize the Middle East in order to render the region's media production and transmission patterns comprehensible. Though Kraidy makes an earnest effort to situate the controversies in their historical and cultural contexts, his rapid transitions between various Arab countries and historic periods can at times confuse even readers who are familiar with the region and its history. The book is rather successful at integrating Arab media into the contexts of new media, globalization, and gender studies. In addition to being written clearly enough for casual readers interested in learning about the Middle East, the book's interdisciplinary nature makes it a valuable addition to any syllabus on global media, Arab politics, or media politics.

In the first chapter, Kraidy sets the historical context within which he evaluates the emergence of reality television in the Middle East. He sketches the history of media in the Middle East by starting with the late Ottoman period and continuing to the modern day. He draws a distinction between these two periods by saying that the late Ottoman period propitiated the growth of nationalist groups while the late twentieth century aided the development of transnational linkages. A central feature of his argument is that reality television represents a change in the visibility of power. Whereas important decisions were made out of the public's view during most of the twentieth century, newly developed media have caused power contestations to take place in the public sphere. He posits reality television as being a part of this shift in visibility, because it represents a reversal of previous power dynamics; average viewers are not only the shows' participants, but they also participate in production decisions. Additionally, the process is innovative because it is presented as being transparent. The rest of the book fleshes out how the democratic ethos of reality television infiltrates other sphere of Arab society.

In subsequent chapters, Kraidy describes case studies that reveal reality television's intrusion into the Middle East's transnational politics and media flows. One theme that every chapter includes is the ubiquitous influence of Saudi culture and financial backing. This theme is most apparent in the second, third and fourth chapters. The second chapter details the battle that some Bahrainis waged to have the *Big Brother*-inspired *al-Ra'is* cancelled, because they objected to a show broadcasting unrelated men and women sharing a household. The show was produced by a Saudi television station, but filmed in Bahrain because producers believed that Bahrainis would be less concerned with this gender mixing. Although religion played a role generating opposition to the show, the station cancelled the program in the name of Arab society's traditional family values.

The third chapter describes the history of a symbiotic relationship between Lebanese television talent and Saudi business men that has resulted in a production-side clash between liberal social values and religious conservatism. The fourth chapter continues this theme by exploring how *Star Academy*, a program similar to *Eurovision*, caused a public debate in Saudi Arabia over modernity, Western influence, and authenticity. Kraidy's description of religious figures' vain attempts to discourage Saudi citizens from viewing the show reveals the complexity of Saudi society. In these three chapters, reality television reveals the intricate processes through which Arab societies are adapting to new advancements in communication technology. It also shows how Arab television is a transnational endeavor that connects diverse social groups across national borders.

Chapter five explores how reality television became part of extant cultural conflicts in Kuwait. This chapter has a strong emphasis on the participation of women in Kuwait's public sphere. The battle that developed there was distinct from the conflicts in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, because Kuwaiti society has relatively strong and independent civil institutions. Kraidy describes how Kuwait's civil society affects the country's political dynamics by teasing out connections between reality television, politics, religion, and gender.

The sixth and seventh chapters take up the role that *Superstar*, another vocal contest, played in international politics. Though the focus of these chapters is ostensibly the relationship between Lebanon and Syria, Kraidy digresses slightly to explain how previous seasons of the show intruded upon

Palestinian and Jordanian politics. Chapter six also takes a second look at gender when Kraidy analyzes how during a female contestant's performance, her father forcibly draped a Syrian flag across her body in an effort to promote Syrian nationalism. Kraidy uses this event to show how political debates that were historically conducted by national leaders and elites have been opened up to the public by the advent of satellite television and specifically, reality television's unscripted nature.

The seventh chapter presents the meat of Kraidy's argument, and answers the question of what the future significance of reality television's effect on public debate could be. He uses the case study of the 2005 "Independence Intifadah," more commonly referred to as the Cedar Revolution in US media. During this event Lebanese citizens used large public protests to demand that Syria withdraw its army from Lebanese land. Kraidy asserts that this model of protest is an iteration of the demonstrations that reality television had generated, and he postulates that this form of protest could be replicated in other political contexts. The events of the Arab Spring in Tunisia and Egypt seem to support Kraidy's argument.

In the book's conclusion, Kraidy suggests where studies of globalization should focus in the future. He pairs this discussion with a final examination of how citizens in Arab countries are attempting to resolve the tension they experience between being "modern" and being "Arab." Though Kraidy attempts to disrupt the bifurcation of these two concepts and others such as "West," "East," and "traditional," at times, his discussion has the effect of reinforcing their opposition. He asserts that people in Arab societies are selectively adopting aspects of modernity and altering them to fit their local cultures.

Kraidy calls for the field of "global communication studies" to adopt non-Western theories in order to truly be global. He specifically suggests that a South-South dialogue would be useful in understanding the processes through which non-Western countries adjust to modernity. He describes his book as being an effort to charting regional, national, and local attempts to mediate the effects of globalization. The book's greatest strength is that in a discussion of reality television, it combines a criticism of the way scholars analyze Arab media and an exploration of modernity's development in the Middle East. It is a valuable read for those interested in the dynamics of global media flows and politics.