

BOOK REVIEWS

Ehab Galal (ed.): Arab TV-Audiences. Negotiating Religion and Identity. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2014.

In the wake of the Arab uprisings many praised the social media for their decisive role in the uprisings. Others argued that it was the impact of satellite channels over decades which finally led to democratization. While all these accounts certainly have a degree of validity they also have shortcomings. First, these studies take for granted that the technology that would allow a free flow of information in the social media is in place. But as a recent report from the World Bank (2014) points out there are important gaps within countries exacerbating the (digital) divide between rural and urban areas. Second, much of the media studies related to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) until now are media-centric and tend to focus on the political economy of the satellite channels or their possible contribution to a democratization process. Third, and maybe most importantly, very little attention has been paid to how the Arab audiences actually use the satellite media and what sense they make of the programs. It is this gap in media studies and, more specific, studies of religious programming related to an Arab context that the book *Arab TV-*

Audiences. Negotiating Religion and Identity fills.

After a thorough review of the development of Arab satellite channels and a useful grouping of the various religious programmes Galal elegantly arrives at the presentation of the main question examined in the book: 'who are the Arab audiences?', and 'How do they navigate and make sense of the abundance of symbolic resources offered by the diverse range of competing programmes and genres'. These questions are addressed in six very different but yet complementing chapters presenting aspects of mediated religion 'as it is transnationally and globally practiced and consumed by Arab-speaking audiences' (p. 7).

The first chapter by Galal himself examines the construction, negotiation and rejection of religious identity and practises based on media ethnography carried out in Copenhagen, London and Cairo. The methodological approach is in itself refreshing in MENA studies as Galal lets the interviewees express their opinion through the use of direct quotes. Galal concludes that satellite programmes are perceived both as a 'protector of tradition and as a basis for making up one's own mind about religious issues' (p. 43). Chapter 2 and 4 focus on Arab audiences outside an Arab geographic context: Khalil Rinnawi analyses Arab audiences in Berlin while Noah Mellor's

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interviewees are based in London. Rinnawi discusses what he labels a 'back to Islam' through media consumption and concludes that the elder generation experiences a practical 'back to Islam' while the younger generation focus more on emotional aspects. In the same vein Mellor discover a generational difference in the use and perception of religious media and its contribution to a reproduction of the cultural identity of the second generation Arabs in London. Chapter 3 by Ratiba Hadj-Moussa follows up on the theme of 'belonging' but does so in a Maghrebi context. As Galal Hadj-Moussa applies a media-ethnographic approach. The understudied issue of connexion to a broader Arab context and identity by the Maghrebis is her focus, and she concludes that 'Arab satellites television reaffirms Maghrebi audiences' affiliation to their Arabic roots and culture' (p. 90). Chapter 5 and 6 shift religious focus and analyses Copts' use of religious media. Vivian Ibrahim explores the perception by Copts in the US and in the Great Britain of an Egyptian Ramadan series introducing viewers to the Muslim Brotherhood. Her analysis demonstrates that the US audience, who has lived longer outside Egypt than the British, is more likely to be critical to the series' argument of a co-existence between Copts and Muslims. Lise Galal analyses 'how Copts use public imaginaries in negotiating identity and belonging' (p. 131) with a

point of departure in two films. She discusses the hegemonic discourse presented by the Egyptian state television celebrating a diverse but unified people vis-à-vis the liberalization of media, which led to a new negotiation of diversity and power of definition.

Like Lise Galal all authors demonstrate that changes were underway long before the popular uprisings in 2010-2011 and that it is possible to gain insight into slow changes and feelings of lived lives, identity and belonging which were – among others – driving factors behind the uprisings. As the book clearly demonstrates such insights can stand out through the use of interviews with audiences and through media-ethnography. In this way the book can be of inspiration for future and much needed studies of audiences, people, identity, belonging, the role and perception of religion, slow changes over time and lived lives in an Arab context.

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