

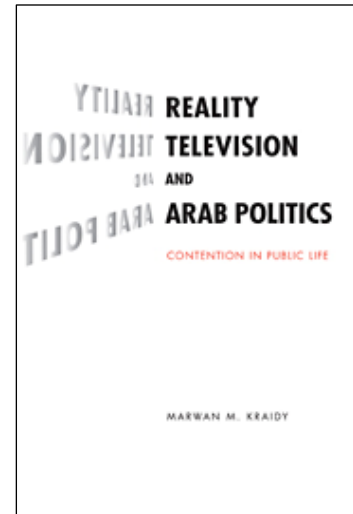
Marwan M. Kraidy, **Reality Television and Arab Politics (Contention in Public Life)**, Cambridge University Press, 2010, 253 pp., \$24.99 (paperback).

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In the West, we tend to question the accuracy of the term “reality television.” These shows, we complain, do not depict reality, but rather the actions of a group of individuals who are consciously playing characters thrown into carefully orchestrated situations, coached by producers, and edited so as to form narratives and character arcs where none actually occurred. While we could raise artistic objections to this complaint (are we similarly troubled that “rock” music is made with neither pebbles nor boulders?), Marwan Kraidy might point out that this debate is but a cocktail party concern in the West because we have media that (mostly, generally) depict reality. In places where state-controlled media show a picture of the world wholly at odds with the lived reality of 99% of their audience, attaching the term “reality” to a particular depiction—especially one that raises questions about gender relations, national image, and modernity—is a fraught act. Kraidy shows how the introduction of reality programming on Arab satellite channels resulted in major domestic and international political incidents, and makes a compelling argument that the absence of democratic public institutions in these Arab countries allowed reality shows to encourage substantive self-reflection about national character and the future course of each country.



Kraidy presents a series of linked case studies. The first looks at what happened when *al-Ra'is*, an adaptation of the show *Big Brother*, began airing live in Bahrain, where it was also being filmed. When two contestants engaged in *ikhtilat*, or mixed-sex social contact (in this case, cheek-kissing), protests erupted, leading to a parliamentary debate that resulted in the production being shut down. While Western media invoked the trope of “Muslim clerics oppose popular culture that reflects Western values; in turn, ‘traditional’ society bows to religious edicts,” Kraidy’s careful analysis of the political debate shows that it was actually a struggle between economic interests looking to carefully modernize Bahrain so as to attract more business from their neighbors in Saudi Arabia and religious conservatives using Islam as a way to shore up their power as the status quo. The result, he says, is that “the *al-Ra'is* shutdown reflected broader struggles in the Arab world between rival narratives of what it means to be Arab-Muslim and modern” (p. 56).

This pattern repeats itself in other countries, but with interesting variations. In Saudi Arabia, the airing of a Lebanese-produced singing competition called *Star Academy* led to the arrest of its Saudi contestant. In Kuwait, however, *Star Academy* prompted a *fatwa* that was almost entirely ignored by the audience, and liberals were able to use its popularity as an argument that the authentic Kuwaiti character was reflected in the show’s Kuwaiti contestant, not the edicts of religious leaders. In Lebanon, the singing

competition *Superstar* touched off protests that became important precedents for the Cedar Revolution. Taken together, these are complex stories about how television is a crucial cultural forum for arguments about how modernity would be adapted in the varied societies of different Arab countries and how religious authority could survive in the face of nationalism.

Few are as well positioned to address this situation as Kraidy. His intimate knowledge of Arab politics allows him to see negotiation where other observers might see simply repression. At the same time, his expertise in media industries lets him untangle the knotty skein of interests in Arab TV: The conservative Saudi owners, the liberal Lebanese producers, the information ministers subject to competing political pressures, and the audiences unsure if they would rather the media show an idealized version of their national self-image or a realistic depiction of their lives. He pursues his subject with a mix of primary-source and archival research, along with participant interviews. The end product, the result of 15 months in the field, is a deep and compelling portrait of the media's role in Arab politics.

Kraidy sets his discussion firmly within the context of the academic literature, yet his method is much more akin to reporting than it is to any more codified qualitative or quantitative technique. There is no participant observation, no content analysis, and no surveying. This might be more of a weakness if it hadn't resulted in such a convincing argument. Nevertheless, it does lead to a second objection: He includes no direct evidence of how audiences responded to these programs or to the political debates that engulfed them. While he quotes viewership statistics, editorials, and protest signs to fascinating effect, his evidence for how reality TV shows were received seems largely circumstantial. The circumstantial evidence is convincing, but the argument would only be strengthened by systematic method, most notably if he had found some way to exclude alternate explanations. The journalistic approach lets him find a story and tell it, and while he opposes his take to the Western media's "prudish Arabs" frame, he does not widen his cultural frame beyond these shows to give context about what other influences might have been present. What other cultural influences were at play? Were these conflicts centered on reality TV unique to the genre or did they crop up more frequently in regard to other things? Kraidy tells his story, but does not really give us a coherent picture of the overall milieu—though, of course, this may not have been his intention.

But these are minor quibbles. Kraidy's methods may be journalistic, but they are certainly rigorous, incorporating a body of academic research that is both broad and deep, ranging from political engagement to media structures to intercultural communication. The source material he uses is formidable, too, and his knowledge of the nuances of Arab politics and media lets him read the subtext behind editorials, parliamentary debates, and programming decisions. Kraidy's journalistic tendencies are ultimately far more productive than they are harmful. While he could have given us a narrowly focused extension of the literature, he instead succeeded in questioning Western scholars' assumptions about how Arab media work by bringing together a disparate swatch of information into a coherent whole. Beyond its practical purpose in relating new information, *Reality Television and Arab Politics* tells a good story, and that should always be praised.