Saudi Arabia, Lebanon and the Changing Arab Information Order

MARWAN M. KRAIDY

American University

This article explores the impact of Arab reality television on Arab governance. Reality television activates hypermedia space (Kraidy, 2006c), a broadly defined inter-media symbolic field, because its commercial logic promotes ostensibly participatory practices like voting, campaigning and alliance building via mobile telephones and the Internet. How does hypermedia space contribute to changing the ways in which Arab citizens and regimes access, use, create and control information? How do the new information dynamics affect the way citizens and governments relate to each other? To address these questions, this article focuses on recent social and political developments in Saudi Arabia and Lebanon, treating the two countries as a dynamic pair whose multi-faceted interactions shape a pan-Arab hypermedia space. This article will endeavor to explain how various Saudi and Lebanese actors have appropriated the reality TV show Star Academy for social and political purposes, and how increased public awareness of the hypermedia space engendered by the program has affected the nature of governance in the two countries. This article concludes with a discussion of how hypermedia space contributes to shifts in the nature and boundaries of social and political agency.

When scholars and policy makers contemplate the Arab "media revolution," they mostly think of Al-Jazeera and its news competitors. They are guided by the assumption that all-news satellite television networks are the predominant, even the single, shaper of the Arab public sphere, a perspective exacerbated by the September 11, 2001 attacks. This article presents an alternative view, emphasizing instead the combined impact of Arab entertainment television and small media such as mobile phones on Arab governance. It explores how entertainment television is an active contributor to shaping what Arab publics discuss and do in both the social and political realms. It focuses specifically on reality television's social and political impact, which stems primarily from its activation of new communication processes between a variety of information and media technologies creating what I call "hypermedia space." In the new Arab information order, reality television activates hypermedia space because it promotes participatory practices like voting, campaigning and alliance building, via mobile telephones and related devices.

Hypermedia space is a broadly defined symbolic field created by interactions between multiple media, from micro text-messaging to region-wide satellite broadcasting. The term "hypermedia" captures the technological convergence and media saturation that characterize many contemporary societies, while emphasizing the speed and convergence of communication processes. The "interoperatibility of once-discrete media … linked together into a single seamless web of digital-electronic-telecommunications" (Deibert, 1997, pp. 114-115) creates a space with many "points of access" that are personalized, mobile, non-conspicuous and networked, and therefore not easily subjected to overt social or political control. Even as technological convergence in the Arab world is still in its infancy, Arab hypermedia space is constituted by various types of communicators (citizens, consumers, activists, etc) using email, mobile telephony, text messaging, digital cameras, electronic newspapers, and satellite television. This space's non-hierarchical nature invites a rethinking of Arab information dynamics.

Hypermedia space is changing Arab governance, i.e. the management of social relations between citizens and of political relations between citizens and the state. The convergence of small media like mobile phones and digital cameras, with big media like television and newspapers, has already changed how information is accessed and controlled. The fluid political situation prevailing in most Arab countries, attributed by many in the region to the neo-conservative theory of creative chaos that is widely believed to guide U.S. Middle East policy, has emboldened activists to use information technologies for social and political gain. Whether governments respond with repression, as in Egypt during the 2005 presidential elections, with a mix of repression and accommodation, as in Saudi Arabia over the past decade, or dissolution, as in Lebanon during the so-called 2005 "Cedar Revolution," their relations with their citizens have changed drastically in the new communication environment.

How does hypermedia space contribute to changing the ways in which Arab citizens and regimes access, use, create and control information? How do the new information dynamics affect the way citizens and governments relate to each other? To address these questions, this paper focuses on Saudi Arabia and Lebanon, where recent social and political developments constitute propitious opportunities to explore the impact of hypermedia space on Arab governance. These two countries play an instrumental role in shaping the Arab information revolution and occupy the poles of the Arab socio-cultural spectrum. Saudi Arabia is the Arab world's most socially conservative nation where public life is ruled by the strictest interpretations of Islamic texts. Lebanon is the Arab world's most socially liberal society where Christians assume an influential, albeit receding, public role. Whereas Saudi entrepreneurs with royal connections finance Arab media, Lebanese journalists, producers and managers populate the industry's ranks. For a quarter century, the convergence of Saudi capital and Lebanese talent has driven major Arab media developments that cannot be captured by simply a comparative study of the two countries since it would gloss over the complexity of the connection between Saudi Arabia and Lebanon. Rather, Saudi Arabia and Lebanon are better understood as a dynamic pair whose multi-faceted interactions shape a hypermedia space that "covers" the entire Arab region.

Understanding the impact of hypermedia space on Arab governance requires a triple analysis of socio-political context, technical developments, and major events that act as catalysts. It requires addressing questions like: What are the social and political contexts that lead actors—activists, citizens, viewers, callers, consumers, etc—to actively use information and media technologies to challenge

prevailing (social, political, economic, etc) arrangements? Do "new" media increase the power of citizens and governments to communicate and act? What catalyst-events trigger uses of technology for social and political change? In a regional Arab situation of crisis and amidst intense global geo-political interest in the Middle East, Saudi Arabia and Lebanon are experiencing political tensions that are different but related. Both countries are awash with media and information technologies that operate within weak or inexistent regulatory frameworks and policy regimes subservient to executive fiat. In this context, reality television acts as a catalyst (among others) because its commercial and dramatic logics promote participation in public events through the interactive use of information technologies, in activities like voting, mobilization, and alliance building. In this article I seek to demonstrate how popular reality television programs help establish dynamic links between socio-political contexts ripe for change and the technical capacities of new media, thus activating hypermedia space.

Hypermedia space blurs boundaries between producers and consumers of information, between popular culture and politics, and between various nationally-based cultural spheres brought into contact by the transnational scope of hypermedia space. This article examines how one reality television program in particular has contributed to changing the "social epistemology" —the public knowledge of technical capacities—surrounding information technologies in Lebanon and Saudi Arabia. This program, Star Academy, has triggered controversy throughout the Arab world and articulated hot-button issues in Arab public discourse, such as democratization, gender relations, and Western influence. This article will endeavor to explain how various Saudi and Lebanese actors have appropriated Star Academy for social and political purposes in the two countries, and how the public awareness of the hypermedia space engendered by the program have affected the nature of governance in both countries. This article ––part of a larger ongoing book manuscript on the social and political impact of Arabic-language reality television–– concludes with a discussion of how hypermedia space contributes to shifts in the nature and boundaries of social and political agency.

The Saudi-Lebanese Connection and the Arab Information Revolution

The military conflicts that have destabilized the Middle East since the end of World War Two have been the main impetus for the development and growth of Arab media. War was either the raison d'être or an opportunity to thrive for both Nasser's Voice of the Arabs radio in the 1950s to Al-Jazeera in the 1990s. Most analysts refer to the 1991 Gulf War as a momentous event that triggered the growth of Arab satellite television. At that time, the Saudi government, which kept its citizens uninformed of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait for three days, found that Saudis and viewers throughout the Arab world had turned to CNN for information. Saudi rulers realized that they needed an Arabic-language counterbalance to CNN to expand their regional influence, and Saudi businessmen close to the royal family saw a lucrative business opportunity. The Saudi strategy of internationalizing Saudi media ownership, hitherto restricted to newspapers, entered a crucial phase (see Boyd, 2001) with the 1991 launch of Middle East Broadcasting Center (MBC) in London by the then Saudi king's brother-in-law. At the same time, the Egyptian government launched the Egyptian Satellite Channel (ESC) to preempt the effect of Saddam Hussein's propaganda on Egyptian soldiers deployed in the U.S. led Operation Desert Storm. These developments, followed by the launch in 1996 of Al-Jazeera from Qatar and the satellite channels LBC and Future TV from

Lebanon (see Kraidy, 2002), and of Saudi-owned, Dubai-based Al-Arabiya in 2003 are milestones in the history of Arab satellite television.

Before the onset of the Arab satellite revolution, the proliferation of unlicensed radio and television stations during the 1975-1990 Lebanese war had developed a large pool of creative and managerial talent. Political parties and warring factions launched several dozen unlicensed television stations that functioned as mouthpieces. One of these stations is particularly relevant. The Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation went on the air in 1985 as a platform for the Christian-nationalist Lebanese Forces militia, and rapidly became the most watched station in Lebanon. As the longest running privately owned Arab television channel, LBC reflects the rise of American style broadcasting over the older, European-inspired, system. This is evidenced by the station's choice of a three-letter acronym name, its focus on entertainment programs, and its reliance on advertisements. Even as a partisan voice in the war, LBC from its early days was run as a business, for example broadcasting special Ramadan programs for Muslim audiences during the civil war. The 1989 "Document of National Understanding" signed in the resort Saudi city of Ta'ef, put an end to military conflict in Lebanon and called for the reorganization of the Lebanese media within a "modern" regulatory framework. The resulting 1994 Audio-Visual Media Law was hailed as the first broadcasting law in the Arab world, but its implementation favored media institutions owned by leading politicians, cut down the number of television stations to 5 (Kraidy, 1998) and sent hundreds of media professionals into unemployment.

Saudi entrepreneurs with plans to launch satellite television channels found a large pool of qualified and available Lebanese media professionals lured by steady employment and big salaries. Their hiring in the early 1990s followed a long history of Lebanese journalists and advertising executives working in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries. MBC hired many Lebanese before the 1994 Audio-Visual Media Law and its 1996 implementation, but the hiring of Lebanese intensified after 1996. Another lure was the promise of editorial independence since MBC studios were initially located in London. Dubai TV, Al-Arabiya and others also have a high number of Lebanese on their staff. In 1996, when LBC and Future TV initiated satellite broadcasting of entertainment programs, they compelled MBC, in operation on satellite since 1991, to enhance its entertainment offerings and change the proportions of news, current affairs and entertainment in its format. In the early 2000s, MBC and other channels moved to Dubai Media City, a free-trade zone dedicated to media and information technology in the United Arab Emirates, and now host to approximately 200 satellite channels. In 2003, the launch of Al-Arabiya, a 24-hour news network, to counter Al-Jazeera, continued the "alliance" of Saudi money and Lebanese skills: Al-Arabiya is currently headed by a Saudi General Manager, Abdel Rahman al-Rashed, and a Lebanese Director of Programs, Nakhlé al-Hage[ii].

Star Academy and the Saudi-Lebanese Connection

The multiple entanglements of the Saudi-Lebanese connection and its decisive role in shaping Arab hypermedia space are represented in the production and reception of LBC's Star Academy, the most popular and most controversial program in Arab satellite television history. The terrestrial station, LBC International (LBCI) is registered in Lebanon and subject to Lebanese law. Its satellite channel Al-Fada'iyya Al-Lubnaniyya (The Lebanese Satellite Channel, known as LBC-Sat) on the other hand, is a

multinational corporation registered in the Cayman Islands, primarily to circumvent Lebanese media ownership laws. Since its founding in 1996, Saudis have owned nearly half of LBC-Sat. Saudi mogul Saleh Kamel initially owned 49 % of the shares and was known to brag in public of his ability to influence programming content, especially in curbing material of a sexual nature that he deemed inappropriate to Saudi sensibilities (See Habib, 2003). For his own business reasons and also because LBC management probably resisted his meddling, Kamel sold his shares to another Saudi mogul, prince Al-Walid Bin Talal, Saudi royal and investor extraordinaire with interests in media companies. Bin Talal bought Kamel's shares for $ US 100 million in 2000, at which time the company was worth around US $ 200 million. With this massive influx of equity, LBC gained the resources to compete regionally, in addition to a degree of political protection since Bin Talal is close to Lebanese President Emile Lahoud. Most importantly, LBC was in position to "retaliate" to the challenge posed by MBC's launch of Man Sa Yarbah Al-Malyun, the Arabic version of Who Wants To Be A Millionnaire, the first Arabic television format-adaptation and the most popular Arab satellite television program in the pre-Star Academy era. This Saudi-funded program featured Lebanese host George Qordahi and Lebanese executive producer Salwa Suwayd, another product of the Saudi-Lebanese connection.

Launched by LBC in December 2003, Star Academy, now with three seasons completed (this analysis refers to the first season unless indicated otherwise), is a watershed Arab media event. Adapted from a format owned by the Dutch format house Endemol after successful French and British adaptations, Star Academy has a large staff by regional standards. It began with a pan-Arab casting campaign that selected 16 young Arabs, including two Lebanese and one Saudi, from a pool of 3000 applicants (personal interviews: Alavanthian, 2004; El-Daher, 2004 & 2005; Saad, 2004). Both LBCI and LBC-Sat broadcast the show from "The Academy," a four-story building near LBC headquarters, where contestants are sequestered for the four months of the program. They are watched by viewers throughout the Arab world every night during a half-hour show reporting on the day's events and called "access", in addition to a two-hour weekly show airing on Friday called "prime." A dedicated satellite channel called "LBC Reality" broadcasts live scenes from the Academy, 24-hours a day for four months. Contestants spend their time attending classes and rehearsals with teachers who each Monday nominate two contestants for possible termination for non-satisfactory performance. The nomination kicks off five days of voting and campaigning during which viewers build coalitions with friends, schoolmates, neighbors or family members and send text messages to be aired on music television channels, all in support of the nominee they want to stay in the program. These "democracy-like" activities conclude with the end of the Friday prime when voting results are announced and the losing nominee exits the show.

Star Academy was instantly popular. Market researchers found massive audiences in most Arab countries, breaking records in some. The show's demographics included young and old, women and men, urban and rural. Empty streets during daily "access" shows prompted some restaurant owners to complain that Star Academy was bad for business while other restaurateurs increased their profits by setting up large screens. The excitement reached its peak during the Friday "prime" when the weekly round of voting ended and the results were released. Discussion boards, fan sites and blogs in Arabic, English and French animated the internet. Text messages sent by viewers extolling favorite contestants were played on moving screen tickers by music television channels and talk-shows and newscasts on Al-Jazeera and

others reported the gossip, developments, and voting results. Star Academy was a media event, or, more specifically, a "hypermedia event."

As a production, Star Academy is a result of Saudi capital and Lebanese talent. As a hypermedia event, it reflects the clash between the economic imperatives of the Saudi-Lebanese connection on the one hand and the cultural differences between Saudi Arabia and Lebanon on the other. The program was immensely popular in both Lebanon and Saudi Arabia. According to IPSOS-STAT, an international polling firm with a strong presence in the Middle East, Star Academy grabbed 80 % of the 15 to 25 audience in Lebanon, and after a few weeks, according to market researchers I spoke with between May and July 2004, had captured a large proportion of the audience in Saudi Arabia. In Lebanon, the program's popularity made it subject to daily editorial commentary and news reports, street conversations and communal viewing. A Sunni Muslim cleric and a couple of journalists criticized the show, but with little effect. In Saudi Arabia, however, as will be elaborated shortly, Star Academy was extremely controversial.

Star Academy articulated the central governance challenge in both Lebanon and Saudi Arabia. In Lebanon, the challenge is political, and entails finding equilibrium between confessional identities and national unity. In that context, this article will show how Star Academy was appropriated by anti-Syrian demonstrators in the wake of the assassination of Rafiq al-Hariri, its immense popularity making it an effective political tool. In Saudi Arabia, the central challenge is social, and requires striking a balance between strict interpretations of Islamic texts and what Saudi rulers regard as the imperatives of modernization. As the next section illustrates, hypermedia space has made this ever-moving equilibrium extremely precarious.

Governance, Hypermedia and Social Reality in Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia has a fragile political system whose backbone consists of the several thousand members of the royal Al-Sa'ud family (see Salameh, 1980, for a historical analysis). The continuing protection of the United States and the agreement between the Al-Sa'ud and Al-Shaykh families whereby the former gives political protection to the latter while the latter endows the former with religious legitimacy, are two pillars of the Saudi order. The alliance between Al-Sa'ud royals and Al-Shaykh clerics has contained tensions between the enshrinement of Islamic values and the modernization drive espoused by Saudi kings since the 1960s. Since the 1980s the royal family has positioned itself as an arbiter, albeit authoritarian, between religious activists, liberal reformers, and business interests in the kingdom. In the aftermath of terrorist attacks within their territory in the last few years, Saudi authorities have launched their own campaign against radical violence in the kingdom and continue to cooperate with the United States in its Middle East policy.

Media and information technologies have historically been at the center of debates and struggles between various Saudi groups. Media issues are related to salient topics, such as Western influences on a society that prides itself to be the cradle of Islam, and expose the Saudi paradox of a capitalistic economy dependent on trade with foreigners in a conservative society with influential elements who are hostile to foreign influences. Radio in the 1930s, television in the 1960s, satellite dishes and the internet in the 1990s, and mobile phones in the 2000s have triggered contentious debates about the Islamic common

good, gender relations, and Western influence. For example, the impending introduction in the early 1960s of television to Saudi Arabia was vehemently opposed by religious clerics and activists, who argued that television pictures violated the Islamic prohibition on reproducing human faces and figures. King Faysal Ibn Sa'ud, however, was convinced that media and information technology were central to his modernization drive. To garner support, he convened a meeting of critics and clerics and presented his case:

> Painting and sculpture are idolatry, but is light good or bad? The judges pondered and replied that light is good; Allah put the sun in the heavens to light man's path. Then asked the King, is a shadow good or bad? There was nothing in the Qur'an about this, but the judges deduced and ruled that shadows are good, because they are inherent in light, and even a holy man casts a shadow. Very well then, said the King, photography is good because it is nothing but a combination of light and shade, depicting Allah's creatures but leaving them unchanged (quoted in Eddy, 1963, p. 258).

Compromise through persuasion is a hallmark of Saudi governance and has historically prevented tensions between contending forces in the kingdom from escalating. The decision to allow television into the country came with strict censorship guidelines which among other things prohibited women who are not fully clothed, who are dancing, participating in sports, or engaged in "overt acts of love;" in addition to references (not exclusively to women) to betting, gambling, alcoholic beverages, Zionism, depictions of violent or sexually arousing scenes, and denigration of the royal family, other countries, or any of the "heavenly religions" (Shobaili, 1971). These guidelines were easy to enforce in the pre-satellite era, when Saudi officials censored production, programming and transmission. The erosion of control initiated by satellite broadcasting in the early 1990s increased with the development of hypermedia space in the 2000s, as the internet, then mobile telephones with digital cameras became ubiquitous.

The Internet was greeted with ambivalence in Saudi Arabia, with the government seeing its potential for both modernization and subversion, while Islamist activists embraced it as a tool to "spread good and combat evil." The internet was introduced in 1999, and by April 2003, there were 21 functioning internet service providers and around 1.6 million users ("Analysis: Saudi," 2004). A February 12, 2001 ministerial resolution banning content critical of the Saudi state, advocating violence, or slanderous, sets the censorship parameters enforced at the King 'Abdul 'Aziz City for Science and Technology (KACST), the centralized Internet node for the entire country. According to Saudi Gazette, 25,000 new sites are blocked every month ("Saudi Internet," 2001).

Mobile phones were initially uncontroversial because they were considered culturally neutral. A 2003 report estimated the number of Saudi mobile lines to be double than the number of landlines (respectively 7.2 to 3.5 million) (Saudi Arabia, 2004). This relaxed attitude changed with the introduction of text-messaging, digital cameras, and especially Bluetooth wireless technology (see for example "Bluetooth in," 2005). Bluetooth gives a new twist to a well-established flirting ritual in Saudi Arabia in which an interested youth surreptitiously throws a piece of paper with their phone number on it in front of their object of attraction as their paths cross in a mall or other public space. Bluetooth updates this ritual by enabling users to know whether the person they are interested in is amenable to conversation. The

most important element of Bluetooth is that its activation signals a readiness to socialize. "Using Bluetooth is much better than trying to throw the number to the girls through car windows, or in the shopping center," said a Saudi teenager, "through Bluetooth I guarantee that the other party chose to accept my number or the file I sent. In other words, I don't impose myself on anyone" (Aboud, 2005). The Commission for Commanding the Good and Forbidding the Evil, a body with police powers operating from the Ministry of Religious Affairs, thought otherwise, and many schools and gyms banned camera equipped phones on their premises (Akeel, 2005). An April 2005 law stipulates 1000 lashes, 12 years in jail, and a fine of 100,000 Saudi riyals, or around US $ 26, 670 for anyone caught engaging in "phone pornography" ("New Saudi," 2005). The popularity of Star Academy in Saudi Arabia intensified debate surrounding interactive features of mobile phones such as Bluetooth and text-messaging.

Star Academy and Gender Relations in Saudi Arabia

Star Academy triggered a firestorm of controversy in Saudi Arabia. A columnist called it "a whorehouse" and clerics distributed cassette-tapes of sermons titled "Satan Academy", reflecting a hostile segment of the social and religious elite (see Al-Dakhil, 2005). On the other hand, the program was very popular and lucrative for telecommunications companies who profited from the voting process, since viewers had to pay the equivalent of 2 or 3 $ US each time they voted via text-messaging. Saudi viewers experienced tension between their attraction to the program and religious injunctions against it. As is custom in Muslim societies, viewers sought religious opinions, known as fatwas, to resolve the conflict. The numbers of fatwas about Star Academy requested by viewers was so great that the "Permanent Committee for Scientific Research and the Issuing of Fatwas," which is one of the highest religious authorities in the nation, issued a detailed fatwa which prohibited financing, watching, discussing, voting, or participating in Star Academy ("Fatwa Concerning," 2004) As custom dictates, the fatwa was replete with isnad, references that grounded and found support for it in the Qur'an, Islam's holy book, and Hadith, the collected speeches of the Prophet Muhammad. It began with a preamble that includes the committee's finding that:

> After studying the matter, the Committee thinks that these shows should be banned and it is haram to watch them, finance them, take part in them, call them to vote or to express admiration of them, because of what these shows include of allowing forbidden things concerning which there is consensus that they are forbidden, and doing so brazenly… What brazenness in committing haram and immoral actions can be worse than these shows which include a number of serious evils?

The evils include "free mixing of the sexes," "blatant promotion of immorality," and "the call to remove modesty and pride from the hearts of Muslims." After explaining these points, the clerics conclude with the injunction to Saudi viewers that:

> It is not sufficient for you to abstain from watching these shows; you should also advise and remind those whom you know watch them or take part in them in any way, because that comes under the heading of cooperating in righteousness and piety, and forbidding one another to engage in sin and transgression.

The central source of anger and objection in Saudi Arabia was Star Academy's portrayal of gender relations. The prevention of ikhtilat, or gender mixing, is the pillar of Saudi social organization. Wahhabi doctrine considers hudud, or the boundaries between public and private space, divinely decreed in the Qur'an and therefore sacred. Men and women are only allowed to interact once sanctioned by marriage and only in private space.

Star Academy violates the key rule restricting male-female interaction to private family space since males and female participants in the show share living space for 4 months. Although bedrooms and bathrooms are separate, male and female contestants interact closely, touch each other's bodies often, and dance on stage together. Some "access" shows even featured pillow fights and occasional incursions of members of one gender into the sleeping quarters of the other. There were also rampant rumors of sexual affairs, the most persistent of which involved Bashar the Kuwaiti and Sophia the Moroccan. The fatwa of the Standing Committee for Academic Research and Issuing Fatwas makes it very clear that the central concern was the role of women in society and their relations with men, lingering on the "immorality" of indecently dressed women, and mentioning explicitly women who look directly into men's eyes and women who dance in "seductive" ways.

According to Fatima Mernissi (1987), a leading feminist sociologist from Morocco, Islamic theology believes that female sexuality is active while male sexuality is passive. As a result, she argues, controlling women's sexuality is essential for social order because giving free reign to women's sexual desires brings fitna, or discord, upon Muslim societies. In addition to religion, history makes the status of women a particularly sensitive issue in the Arab world because of past attempts by French and British colonial powers to change indigenous laws related to women. As a result, the status of women historically evolved into a symbol of cultural and religious authenticity, and of resistance to colonial and imperial power. By featuring active and attractive women who interact closely and compete with men, Star Academy violates rules of male-female interaction that prevail in Saudi Arabia.

While on the screen every episode of Star Academy displays multiple violations of hudud, the interactions the show activates in hypermedia space call for the active violation of sacred boundaries by Muslim viewers. The Internet is awash with pictures of Star Academy participants and video segments of the show. Bloggers scrutinize individual performances and evaluate voting results. Perhaps more importantly, by repeatedly inviting people to vote by text-messaging using their mobile phone, Star Academy helps develop public awareness of the technical capacities of information technologies. Because its dramatic structure and financial performance depends on viewers' votes, Star Academy helped disseminate the idea of information technology as a lifestyle device. Once only a business tool, mobile phones have now become a social industry of their own, including personalized accessories, and ringtones. The best example is perhaps the so-called "Islamic phone," a mobile phone with a lunar calendar, special rings at prayer times, and even a compass pointing the holy city of Mecca. Interactive television shows like Star Academy at the same time promote and depend on the new "electronic" lifestyle. Turn on an Arab music video channel at any hour of the day or night, and tickers moving at the bottom of the screen display love messages between young Arabs who usually reveal only their first name while small multimedia colored flags sometimes declare the text-messenger's nationality. There are even digital love

scales, with groups of friends voting on the compatibility of two people they know. Arab hypermedia space hosts social relations that are frowned upon in Saudi public space.

Media and Governance in Lebanon

While Star Academy posed a social challenge to Saudi governance, in Lebanon it articulated a political struggle, in line with that country's history of political and media fragmentation. Lebanon's experience with the mass media is unique in the Arab world and influential beyond the country's small territory. Since the 19th century, Lebanese journalists have founded major Arab newspapers, including Egypt's Al-Ahram and Saudi Arabia's Al-Sharq Al-Awsat. In the television era, Lebanon was the only Arab country not to have a fully state-owned national television station. Launched at the initiative of private business interests approached the government for a broadcasting license in the 1950s, Télé-Liban was, from its founding in 1959 until the early 2000s, a hybrid, half-private, half-state owned entity. In wartime, several unlicensed competitors outperformed Télé-Liban, and in the early postwar years the station's private shares functioned as a "spare tire" for politicians who were uncertain about getting a license. When licenses were awarded in 1996 according to the 1994 Audio-Visual Media Law, Télé-Liban fell into a protracted decline (see Kraidy, 2005).

Just as Télé-Liban was symptomatic of a weak state, its unlicensed competitors symbolized the strength of civil society and confessional politics. The war precipitated the creation of a media landscape as diverse and fractured as Lebanon: conservative and radical, Christian and Muslim, secular and religious, capitalist and communist. The postwar regulatory challenge consisted in finding a formula that restored the authority of the state while preserving a politically representative media system. The licensing process was nakedly political, distributing licenses to leading politicians according to the Lebanese confessional power-sharing formula, which distributes resources and positions according to sectarian affiliation. Thus there was a Maronite station (LBC), a Sunni station (Future TV), a Shiia station (National Broadcasting Network, or NBN) and a Greek Orthodox station with Druze influence (Murr Television, or MTV). Additional licenses were later given to Hizbullah's Al-Manar, to a Christian station operated by the Maronite clergy, Télé-Lumière, and to New TV, formerly owned by the Lebanese communist party (Kraidy, 1998). The equilibrium achieved by licensing stations according to confessional criteria, periodically shaken by inflammatory broadcasts or state harassment (Kraidy, 1999)—and with the notable exception of the shutdown of MTV in September 2003—lasted until the tumultuous events of 2005.

Television assumed a central political role on February 14, 2005, when a massive car bomb killed the former Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri, on a major Beirut seaside thoroughfare. Future TV reacted immediately to the late morning bombing that killed its founder, and morphed into a full-time anti-Syrian screen clamoring for Lebanese independence. A diagonal black band on Future TV's logo signaled mourning and an on-screen digital calendar marked the days since Hariri's assassination. The channel became a full-time propaganda machine, celebrating Hariri's legacy, attacking the Syrian regime widely perceived to be behind the assassination, and keeping a focus on the UN investigation initially headed by German judge Detlev Mehlis. Future TV talk-shows featured a parade of anti-Syrian speakers while special music videos and promotional clips asking for "The Truth" flooded the program grid. This situation

prevailed until December 2005, when a new general manager was asked to bring Future TV back to a semblance of normalcy to stop the gaping financial losses of the previous eleven months (personal interview: Aintrazi, 2005). LBC, whose political bosses were allies of Hariri's block in parliament, focused exclusively on the assassination only for a few days before going back to regular programming, thus avoiding the crippling financial repercussions of "opening the air" completely to the Hariri story. Both Future TV and LBC's editorial lines were highly critical of the Syrians and favorable to US and European intervention against Syria.

On the opposite side, New TV, owned by Hariri foe Tahssin Khayyat, and Hizbullah's Al-Manar expressed a different narrative, opposed to Western interference in Lebanon and concerned about "U.S.-Israeli plans" for the region. While they did not explicitly support Syrian interference in Lebanon, both stations refrained from criticizing the Syrian regime and both were critical of the UN Mehlis investigation. New Television, who in the past had been critical of the Syrian-Lebanese security apparatus, propounded the secular version while Al-Manar put forth a religiously colored rendition of the situation. Both channels questioned the version of events given by the other side, oftentimes in a tit-for-tat direct questioning of facts. For instance, both stations raised suspicions about the number of demonstrators on March 14, 2005, which was over 1 million according to LBC and Future Television. When Future Television showed footage of demonstrators and claimed they were not Lebanese, Al-Manar retaliated by inviting some of the persons shown to demonstrate, on live television, that they were, in fact, Lebanese.

Reality Television and Hypermedia in the Cedar Revolution

If initial responses to Hariri's assassination confirmed that television stations in Lebanon remained primarily political instruments, the demonstrations that ensued, known as the "Cedar Revolution," indicate that the participatory activities called for by a program like Star Academy, like voting by mobile phone, using text-messaging to build alliances and promote contestants, can in some cases have concrete political applications. The ways in which demonstrators used mobile phones, television and vocabulary from Star Academy and other reality television programs suggests that the combination of hypermedia space and popular culture can have a powerful impact on public life in the Arab world.

Several signs using the language of reality television could be seen among protesting crowds during the "Cedar Revolution." This was evident in the massive March 14, 2005, "opposition" demonstration against the Syro-Lebanese security apparatus, whose main demands were the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon and the resignation of Lebanon's leading politicians and security officers. Consider a hand-made, English-language sign carried by a demonstrator: the words "Lahoud Nominee" (referring to Lebanese President Emile Lahoud, whose term was illegitimately extended by Syrian fiat) sit atop the exhortation "call 1559" (in reference to the United Nations resolution calling for the withdrawal from Lebanon of Syrian troops and intelligence operatives). The sign is effective because it replicates weekly reality television rituals like nomination, mobilization, and voting, with which a vast number of Arab viewers are familiar.

When this ritual is transposed onto a sign carried by a Beirut demonstrator and captured by the cameras of myriad Arab satellite television channels and individual mobile phones equipped with digital

cameras, it articulates a political agenda concisely and effectively. It uses a vocabulary that most Arabs, familiar with Star Academy, recognize and understand. The message on the sign, consisting of a few words and four digits, is eminently media-savvy in an age of image and sound bites. Expressing a complex political issue in a snapshot rich with meaning, it is perfect material for the frantic and repetitive news cycle of channels such as Al-Arabiya and Al-Jazeera in addition to CNN and other Western networks. Since nominations and Short Messaging Service voting are part of reality television rituals worldwide, the message has a potentially global audience. Satellite television financed by Saudi Arabian tycoons brought Lebanese politics to pan-Arab audiences, and popular culture made it widely palpable.

Reality television responded directly to Hariri's death in a way that one expects from news but not from entertainment media. Lebanese channels are pan-Arab leaders in entertainment programming and have produced and broadcast the most highly rated Arab reality television programs. Superstar, the Arabic version of American Idol, has completed three successful seasons on Future TV (Kraidy, 2006a & b). Star Academy is aired by LBC, a channel that has historically opposed Syrian intervention in Lebanon. Immediately after Hariri's assassination, Future TV suspended regular programming, unified its hitherto separate terrestrial and satellite broadcasts, and postponed indefinitely the third installment of Superstar. However, previous Superstar contestants were summoned to record patriotic songs and shoot music videos that were incessantly played for months.

On Star Academy, a rehearsal was interrupted live on the air to announce Hariri's death. Then LBC went into a week of mourning. Unlike Future TV, LBC did not suspend its regular programs, but dedicated current affairs news and talk-shows to the issue. The Star Academy prime that followed the mourning period turned into a patriotic fest where contestants hailing from throughout the Arab world sang patriotic Lebanese songs against the backdrop of a huge Lebanese flag. The dénouement, presumably called in by millions of Arab voters (but, as the rumor mill suggested, possibly staged by LBC officials), was pure political spectacle: The Syrian contestant was voted out, and an eerie silence wrapped her humiliating exit from the stage.

The unceremonious on-stage dismissal of the Syrian candidate symbolically echoed the forced resignation of Omar Karameh, who was Lebanon's prime minister. In a rare moment in Arab politics, popular demonstrations had compelled a leader to resign. The importance of this event should not be underestimated. With thousand of Syrian troops still on Lebanese land and their colleagues in the mukhabarat (secret police) still haunting Lebanese streets and psyches, hundreds of thousands of demonstrators nonetheless called for and obtained the resignation of a sitting prime minister backed by Syria. Of course, without the support of the United States and France, who found a shared national interest in the Lebanese issue, and the tacit approval of Saudi Arabia, the Beirut demonstrations may have been quelled. Nonetheless the television cameras of Arab (Saudi funded) and Western channels, feeding live pictures to a worldwide audience, played a crucial role in sustaining the demonstrations. The demonstrators did not take US-French-Saudi support for granted, but courted and nurtured it, putting on an attractive visual spectacle for television cameras that took scenes and pictures that were then sent back and forth in an activated hypermedia space.

The demonstrators on Beirut's Martyrs Square were media savvy. Their main message was "national unity." Early on, leaders of the opposition agreed to instruct their followers to wave nothing but Lebanese flags. This strategy preempted state repression under the guise of banning sectarian demonstrations and preserving national unity. The demonstrations against Syria's policies towards Lebanon were organized by the "March 14 Opposition," a heterogenous coalition of political forces that cut across Lebanon's various religious communities, and included a variety of student, professional, and civil society groups and unions. Media and public relations professionals put together a human Lebanese flag made of 10,000 people holding cardboard squares painted in white, green or red. Young women painted small Lebanese flags on their cheeks like English soccer fans, and the less inhibited among them painted the flag on other body parts certain to attract the cameras. The absence of the usual multi-colored range of flags representing sectarian or partisan loyalties and the proliferation of Lebanese flags had a symbolic impact on swaths of public opinion in a country ordinarily marred by multiple political, religious and social cleavages. The "other" demonstration, organized by Hizbullah and its allies, also featured a proliferation of Lebanese flags (It is important to note that the Free Patriotic Movement, headed by retired army General Michel Aoun, was a major participant in the March 14 demonstrations, but later broke with the Hariri-dominated coalition that organized these demonstrations and concluded a memorandum of understanding with Hizbullah).

The Beirut demonstrators exploited hypermedia space to their full political advantage, using mobile phones, digital cameras and the internet, in addition to courting television news cameras. Demonstrators took pictures using their mobile phones equipped with digital cameras, which they promptly transmitted to news organizations or to friends who uploaded them on websites dedicated to their cause. These "citizen-correspondents," as a columnist in the Lebanese daily newspaper Assafir called them, ensured that their cause would be seen across the world. Unlike the conspicuous CNN and Al-Jazeera cameras, the invisible cameras of thousands of demonstrators acted as non-obtrusive surveillance system that went a long way in preempting repression by the security apparatus. The proliferation of cameras is likely to have contributed to preventing clashes between demonstrators and counter-demonstrators, no easy feat when one considers that between one and a half to two million Lebanese, or between a third of or half of the total population of the country, descended on the streets of Beirut in the span of a week in March 2005.

When the Lebanese army established checkpoints around central Beirut to prevent demonstrators from reaching demonstration sites, soldiers at some checkpoints whispered to the demonstrators that they supported them, a nugget of information that was immediately "blasted" via text messages, allowing demonstrators to converge on checkpoints where soldiers or commanding officers appeared sympathetic to their cause. At other checkpoints, young women put red roses in soldiers' hands and rifles, thus "disarming" them and helping flows of men and women alerted via text-messaging "blasts" to reach designated protest areas. Mobile phones helped demonstrators mobilize and organize; cameras and reality television vocabulary helped them propagate their message.

Hypermedia Space, Reality Television and the Future of Arab Governance

The hypermedia space resulting from multiple configurations between various media can be said to be an alternative space for Arab social and political relations. Shaped primarily by the Saudi-Lebanese connection, Arab hypermedia space is taken up in different ways in Saudi Arabia and Lebanon. How hypermedia space is used is therefore dependent on political context, availability of technology, and most importantly the willingness of people to use hypermedia space for specific purposes. The commercial and dramatic logics of reality television help to activate these hypermedia flows. Viewers of Star Academy consume and produce information about contestants on the Internet, mobilize and create voting coalitions using mobile phones, read and write about them in the papers, and create blogs or fan sites. They respond to "expert" opinions by journalists and talk-show guests who comment on reality television. Reality television, in other words, brings knowledge of hypermedia space to the everyday, mundane level.

As a result, whether posing a social challenge in Saudi Arabia or articulating a political struggle in Lebanon, hypermedia space is contributing to changes in Arab governance. Viewers participating in reality television rituals learn that sending a flow of text-messages in favor of a Star Academy contestant to music television channels that post them on moving tickers, helps generate chatter about the contestant in question and thereby increase their visibility and ultimately their chances of outlasting the competition. This knowledge can be tapped by political activists who "plug into" networks of friends and acquaintances engaged or familiar with reality television, converting them partially into instruments of political mobilization. The resulting large numbers of demonstrators, once on television news, become a potent tool of political pressure in the context of Arab politics, where leaders are increasingly concerned with their legitimacy. Arab leaders also know that in a media saturated world where Arab regimes are under the microscope of the Bush II administration and international public opinion, in addition to internal pressures of various kinds, clamping down on demonstrators can be counter-productive.

The flags, cameras and mobile phones did not, on their own, prevent the Syrian-Lebanese security apparatus from repressing the demonstrators, but their combination with pressure from the United States, France and Saudi Arabia did. Saudi Arabia, whose billionaires finance Arab media, was on the side of the "Cedar Revolution," so Saudi officials did not attempt to limit coverage of the demonstrations. In addition, LBC and Future TV, two powerful outlets, were supportive of the "March 14" demonstrators. The alignment of the political economic structure of Arab media with the interest of the Lebanese demonstrators and against the Syrian regime made the "Cedar Revolution" a more important event than it would have otherwise been. The potency of hypermedia space depends on the ability of activists to use media and information technologies but also on the political decisions of "big" media owners, a dependence that is nonetheless not complete since Al-Jazeera, opposed to the Saudi regime and to United States policies in the Middle East, gave sustained and overall positive coverage to the Beirut demonstrations.

In Saudi Arabia, hypermedia space is radically different from the heavily policed public space where interaction between non-married males and females
is strictly prohibited. The interactivity and mobility inherent in hypermedia space subverts a principle that is at the heart of Saudi social organization. The popularity of reality television, coupled with the wide

availability of information technology, in a socially restrictive context, activates new information permutations that undermine the social order. The most important challenge probably resides in the "alternative" male-female relations portrayed on Star Academy, with women interacting and competing with men. Similarly, hypermedia space empowers Saudi women who are disempowered in Saudi public space (Interestingly, the February 12, 2006 resolution about the Internet does not explicitly mention women or sexual issues). It is no coincidence that women make up two thirds of Saudi internet users ("Country Profile," 2006). When people purposely use deterritorialized, interactive and mobile technologies such as the internet and mobile telephones, they can undermine social and political boundaries from within, and therefore they are much more difficult to control. Under propitious politico-economic conditions, hypermedia space acts potentially as an incubator of social change.

In Lebanon, hypermedia space contributed to the momentum of a political coalition that went from being the opposition in March 2005 to taking the majority of seats in the Parliament by June of the same year. For more than a decade, Lebanese security forces in coordination with Syrian intelligence, had quelled demonstrations, jailed activists, and harassed anyone suspected of political opposition. While a changing geopolitical climate and U.S.-French support were instrumental to the initial success of the "Cedar Revolution," the judicious use of small and big media connections by the demonstrators was an important factor in sustaining the movement. Besides mobilization and coordination, hypermedia space was a crucial tool in conveying an image of national unity—albeit contrived, temporary and fragile— that prevented security forces from justifying a clampdown on activists with the claim of controlling sectarian demonstrations. Thus demonstrators made the Lebanese flag, as a putative symbol of national unity, ubiquitous, painted on signs and bodies, posted on websites, and most importantly saturating television footage.

By making the capacities of hypermedia space visible to Arab viewers, interactive, multimedia-using reality television shows like Star Academy pose a social challenge in Saudi Arabia and articulates a political struggle in Lebanon. In these two countries and elsewhere in the Arab world, activists struggling to grab social and political agency, that is, the ability to not follow a predetermined course of action, find hypermedia space useful because agency resides partly in hypermedia space. Bolter and Grusin argue that "[M]edia do have agency, but that agency … is constrained and hybrid … the agency of cultural change is located on the interaction of formal, material, and economic logics that slip into and out of the grasp of individuals and social groups" (Bolter and Grusin, 1999, p. 78). When individuals and communities "connect" and activate information configurations towards achieving social or political objectives, they fulfill the agency potential of hypermedia space (albeit tactically and temporarily, as it turned out in the case of Lebanon). Most importantly, as examples discussed previously demonstrate, hypermedia space operates as a tool to extend the scope of agency into "real" public space.

The social and political significance of hypermedia space will probably outlast the current craze of reality television. When individuals engaging in contentious politics become producers of information, old understandings about the political impact of mass media and the formation of public opinion no longer make sense. The most significant development in the Arab public sphere is the ease and speed in which information circulates between myriad information technologies with varying size, scope and uses. Information therefore originates from new groups, circulates in new ways and reaches new publics.

These new information dynamics in the Arab world are already having profound political consequences. Arab publics know that "big" media outlets are bound by their funders' agendas. Al-Jazeera's editorial line will not violate the principles of Qatari foreign policy, and Al-Arabiya is an instrument of Saudi policy. Similarly, al-Hurra is unable to shed the stigma of being a tool of the U.S. government, and mainstream Western news outlets rarely oppose their governments' foreign policies. The use of "small" media, on the other hand, depends on the work of interconnected small groups of activists who know and trust each other. This trust endows the information circulated between them with a level of believability that governments and big media newsmakers can only dream about. Increasingly media-savvy, technology-proficient and politically emboldened, aided by the converging interests of telecommunications and media corporations, these groups are poised to continue stirring the Arab political soup. Even as the reality television craze appears to be losing steam, it has unleashed new information configurations that will outlast it.

While talk of reality television directly bringing democracy to the Arab world is based on incomplete analyses and an overly-optimistic outlook, Arab activists have drawn lessons from the reality television phenomenon that they are now using more or less successfully in political action. In this environment, top-down communication strategies may lose "heart-and-minds" battles to small groups of mobile, motivated and networked activists. Arab governments and U.S. "public diplomacy" strategists appear to be late in learning the same lesson. Centralized broadcasting facilities, in Cairo or Springfield (headquarters of the unsuccessful U.S. government Arabic-language television channel al-Hurra), increasingly look like massive artillery canons shooting blanks, while activist groups have shown they are capable of scoring political points with the tools of the digital age with laser beam precision. The constantly shifting communication order—or disorder— they are creating is poised to influence Arab governance as governments and large-scale mass media organizations could be reduced to watching and commenting, or, more ominously, co-opting hypermedia space and its nascent publics.

Biography

Marwan M. Kraidy is Assistant Professor of International Relations and International Communication and founding director of the Arab Media in Public Life (AMPLE) project at American University, in Washington, DC. He is the author of Hybridity, or the Cultural Logic of Globalization (Temple University Press, 2005) and a co-editor of Global Media Studies: Ethnographic Perspectives (Routledge, 2003). He spent AY 2005-2006 as a Fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, working on his current book project on the social and political impact of Arab reality television, which he will continue to write as a Scholar-in-Residence at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania in spring 2007.

References

'Abbud, Ghada (2005, February 10). Teenagers Sinking Their Teeth Into New Technology, Arab News.

Ayntrazi, Tariq (2005, December 18). General Manager, Future Television (Beirut), Dubai, United Arab Emirates.

'Akeel, Maha (2005, January 10). Camera Phones Legal but Individual Restrictions Apply, Arab News.

Alavanthian, Sebouh, Director of Programming, Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation, personal interview, LBC headquarters, Adma, Lebanon, 5 July, 2004.

Al-Dakhil, Munira Muhammad (2005, February 27). "Destructive Academy is Harmful to the Family," al-Riyadh.

Analysis: Saudi rulers ease their grip on the media, BBC Monitoring Media Services, May 28, 2004. London: British Broadcasting Corporation

Bluetooth in Saudi Arabia Prospers in Lost Time" (2005, February 10). Al-Hayat [in Arabic].

Bolter, Jay David and Grusin (1999). Remediation: Understanding new media. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Boyd, Douglas (2001) "Saudi Arabia's international media strategy: Influence through multinational ownership," in K. Hafez (Ed.), Mass Media, Politics and Society in the Middle East (pp. 43-60), Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.

Country profile: Saudi Arabia (2006, July 28). Available http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/country_profiles/791936.stm. London: British Broadcasting Corporation.

Deibert, Ronald J. (1997). Parchment, Printing, and Hypermedia: Communication in World Order Transformation. New York: Columbia University Press.

Eddy, W. (1963). King Ibn Sa'ud: Our faith and our iron. Middle East Journal, 17(3), 257-263.

Al-Daher, Pierre, General Manager, Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation, personal interview, LBC headquarters, Adma, Lebanon, July 5, 2004.

Al-Daher, Pierre, General Manager, Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation, personal interview, LBC headquarters, Adma, Lebanon, August 21, 2005.

Fatwa concerning the program Star Academy (2004). Standing Committee for Academic Research and Issuing Fatwas [In Arabic].

Habib, Osama, (2003, December 3). Alwaleed buys large stake in LBC SAT, Daily Star.

Kraidy, Marwan M. (1998). Broadcasting Regulation and Civil Society in Postwar Lebanon, Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media, 42(3), 387-400.

Kraidy, Marwan M. (1999). State Control of Television News in 1990s Lebanon, Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly, 76(3), 485-498.

Kraidy, Marwan M. (2002). Arab Satellite Television between Regionalization and Globalization, Global
        Media Journal, 1(1), available http://lass.calumet.purdue. edu/cca/gmj/new_page_1.htm

Kraidy, Marwan M. (2005). Hybridity, or the Cultural Logic of Globalization. Philadelphia: Temple
        University Press.

Kraidy, Marwan M. (2006a). Reality Television and Politics in the Arab World (Preliminary Observations),
        Transnational Broadcasting Studies 2 (1), 7-28, also available http://www.tbsjournal.com.

Kraidy, Marwan M. (2006b). Popular Culture as a Political Barometer: Lebanese-Syrian Relations on
        Superstar, Transnational Broadcasting Studies, June, available http://www.tbsjournal.com.

Kraidy, Marwan M. (2006c, September 4). Hypermedia and Governance in Saudi Arabia, First Monday,
        11(9), available http:www.firstmonday.org/issues/special11_9

Mernissi, Fatima (1987). Beyond the veil: Male-female dynamics in modern Muslim society. Bloomington,
        IN: Indiana University Press.

New Saudi law to jail, lash cellphone porn users (2005, April 16). Riyadh, Saudi Arabia: Reuters.

Sa'd, Roula, Director of Promotion and Marketing, Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation, personal interview,
        LBC headquarters, Adma, Lebanon, July 5, 2004.

Salameh, Ghassan (1980). Political Power and the Saudi State, MERIP Reports, No 91.

Saudi Internet Rules (2006). Available http://www.al-bab.com/media/docs/Saudi.htm

Shobaili, A. S. (1971). A historical and analytical study of broadcasting and press in Saudi Arabia.
        Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio, USA.

---

[i] This article is part of a book project on the social and political impact of Arab reality television and offers intermediary analysis based on 16 months of non-continuous fieldwork in Beirut, Dubai, Kuwait, Paris and London, including 100 interviews with media producers, directors, and commentators. Fieldwork was partly funded by the United States Institute of Peace and American University's Research Competition Award. Writing was mostly done when the author was a fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, DC., from September 2005 to May 2006. The section about Saudi Arabia draws heavily on Kraidy, Marwan M. (2006, September). Hypermedia and Governance in Saudi Arabia, *First Monday*, www.firstmonday.org, which benefited from considerable feedback from Sandra Braman and Thomas Malaby.

[ii] Dawud-Al-Sharyan, a Dubai-based journalist, was appointed in October 2006 as Deputy General Manager of Al-Arabiya, reflecting a trend to employ more Saudis and Gulf Arabs in Saudi-owned companies.