The Challenges and Limits of Universalist Concepts: Problematizing Public Opinion and a Mediated Arab Public Sphere

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Despite the existence of discouraging barriers for the development of an institutionalized, free and participatory media in the Arab world, the Arab mediascape at the beginning of the 21st century is often heralded as an agent of change (Telhami 2006; Alterman 2005). The general argument is as follows: whereas in the past, information used to be a strict state monopoly, in the age of satellite television it is becoming increasingly hard for governments to control information. In addition, the increase in Arab channels beamed across around the globe is enabling more people to get news and information from sources outside their borders while making governments less certain about their ability to exercise state control, shape what people think and mobilize the masses (Telhami 2003). Not surprisingly, the emergent vibrant Arab mediascape has come to be associated with changing and new socio-political dynamics. Not only is this phenomenon opening spaces for a more pronounced exercise of voice(s), but it is also fostering a more targeted social agency that is redefining old forms of mediation and crystallizing news ways of involvement in public issues for a greater number of people.

A notable effect of these changes is the re-evaluation of the significance of Arab public opinion as media are believed to have further politicized Arab viewers. For some, the new Arab media landscape has not only emancipated public opinion, but also facilitated the rise of a public sphere that is akin in some ways to the philosophical category Jürgen Habermas posits in the context of modern European bourgeois society. The possibilities this mediated public
sphere are affording participants in what has been a closed media environment marked by control and censorship in the not-so-distant past issues to contend with. At the same time, the notion of an Arab public sphere poses a number of theoretical difficulties which cannot be overlooked, not the least because it is embedded in normative claims about democratic politics (public deliberation) and mass-media workings (people’s reception, perception and use of the media). Focusing on broadcast media, this paper examines the intricacies and implications of a mediated public sphere in an attempt to reflect on the opportunities and promises of the new changes on individual and group dynamics, particularly with respect to socio-political engagement, and to problematize an uncritical conception of an Arab public sphere à la Habermas.

Arab Public Opinion in the Era of Transnational Media

Not surprisingly, the Arab mediascape is the subject of growing scholarly interest. At least two main positions—mostly based on non-evidential work—can be noted in this respect: on one end of the spectrum are those who see in satellite television a vehicle for socio-political change and, on the other, are those who believe that satellite television has no decisive role in shaping public opinion. Transnational satellite television is perceived as a player to contend with, contributing to momentous changes in Arab society and shaping what Arabs think during an era marked by the interconnectedness between local, regional and international politics. Gilbert Achcar (2005), for example, argues that satellite television has greatly contributed to the emergence of an ‘independent’ Arab public opinion, while Mohammed El Oifi (2005) sees that the coming of age of Arab satellite TV and the Middle Eastern governments’ loss of control over the media have ‘emancipated’ this public opinion. In Shibley Telhami’s view (2002), the information revolution has empowered the public in the region on a scale not seen for years. The Arab public can no longer be disregarded. Similarly, Jon Alterman (2005) sees the new pluralistic media environment as one of the key drivers of public opinion, while transnational satellite television is becoming a powerful medium for transmitting news and shaping opinion in the Arab world. Other media analysts are even more assertive about the role of new media in spurring change, with some arguing that Arab satellite television is becoming the motor of change insofar as it shapes people’s ideas of what is possible and often inspires them to protest in order to vent their frustration (Lynch 2005). For others, however, Arab media mostly reflect public opinion. As Stratford-Wright (2004) says, people watch TV or read newspaper articles very often because these resonate with their preexisting passions and opinions.