Media & Citizenship:

Transnational Television Cultures

Reshaping Political Identities in the European Union.

Christina Slade

University of Utrecht, City University London.

Introduction

These seven research reports contain the first published discussion of results of a European Union (Seventh Framework Programme) funded project entitled *Media & Citizenship Transnational Television cultures Reshaping Political Identities in Europe.* The project, led by myself through the University of Utrecht, working with Ingrid Volkmer (representing Bielefeld), Myria Georgiou (London School of Economics), Leonor Camauër (Örebro University) and Fayçal Najab and Chamia Ghanjaoui (Sorbonne Université de Paris 3) studies the impact of Arabic language television on conceptions of national and European Union citizenship. The project combines surveys and media diaries in six EU capitals - Amsterdam, Madrid, Paris, London, Berlin and Stockholm, with focus group work in those cities and Nicosia. The reports here discuss the national focus group outcomes. In this introduction, I sketch the broad outlines of the empirical data and give an overview of the focus groups.

Arabic – and particularly Muslim – television audiences in Europe have been a matter of much scholarly and popular debate in recent years. In the wake of 9/11, Marie Gillespie led a team in the UK looking at Muslim viewers and their evaluation of the press and media. Gillespie argues that many of those interviews are critical and competent media users.

> The lack of information or the narrowness of political perspective on events creates a great deal of frustration, particularly at moments of crisis. This leads to an active search for alternative news sources: newspapers, magazines, Internet, television. The consumption of multiple alternative news sources from different perspectives, in turn, cultivates highly critical news consumers. (2006: 913)

In her view, Arabic speakers use the densely inhabited network of transnational television channels, judiciously balancing the information available on BBC, on Al Jazeera and on the national Arabic channels available by satellite, with internet and press: a highly individualistic reasoned and critical viewer emerges.

Gillespie's assertions offer a valuable counterweight to stereotypes of Arabic speakers in Europe, linked via the ubiquitous satellite dishes to an alien orientalist, Islamist *ummah*, inculcating or reinforcing cultural practices that are anti-democratic and anti-feminist and – in the extreme cases – terrorist. Those stereotypes rely on a vision of Arabic speaking audiences as passive, uniform and unreflective. The work of Gillespie and her team shows how limited that view is. Yet there is more to be said. The national focus of their study leaves unexplored the rich new cross-national media terrain.

In the past, national media had a predominant – and often unchallenged role – in influencing public debate; in the globalised media world that is no longer so. The Habermasian ideal of a national public sphere in which debates of national import occur has passed. The media of the nation-state have fragmented into what Gitlin (1998) calls 'sphericules'; at the same time new mediated trans- and cross-national spaces have come to dominate the news agenda. The theorists in this project study spheres of debate determined in part by language and use a range of terms: Slade (2006) 'global private spheres', Volkmer (2007) 'subnational media worlds' and Georgiou (2006) 'transnational media cultures'. Our project charts the emerging spaces of Arabic language television across Europe.

There are some hundreds of Arabic language television channels available in European cities, some free to air, some via satellite, some relayed through cable providers. Satellites with footprints over Europe include not just European based but those based in the Arab world such as Arabsat and Nilesat. Viewers can access transnational offerings, such as the suite of Al Jazeera channels (news, but also sport and children's programmes), Al Arabiya, BBC Arabic; niche channels such as the religious Al Iqraa and hundreds of Arabic national channels. Few of these channels depend essentially on advertising as a source of revenue. As Naomi Sakr (2010) recently pointed out at a conference focusing on the proliferation of religious broadcasting channels across the Arabic speaking world, the financial models are precarious.

Basically the number of free to air satellite TV channels in Arabic continues to grow strongly... It means advertising budgets will be spread ever more thinly.

Most channels are supported by government, or sectarian or interest groups, rather than by advertising or license fees. Advertising companies pay for ratings data, in order to set the charging regimes for particular channels or time slots. When advertising does not provide the revenue stream, there is little interest in ratings. The consequence is that data about audiences is slight, unreliable if not non-existent.

The European audiences of Arabic speaking channels are even less understood. While Al Jazeera does gather data about its reach and viewers, none of the hundreds of Arabic language channels delivered in Europe do so. Even national television channels, such as Moroccan or Egyptian television, which do rely on advertising, are not advertising into the European market and do not follow their satellite-enabled viewers. There is a further complication. Under EU rules, satellite delivered content is regulated at the country of upload not of download. EU states have no regulatory control over satellite delivered content.

The consequence is that there is no reliable information on Arabic language audiences in Europe. Even the most cursory form of ratings is unavailable. What is desperately needed is empirical evidence of what is being watched on Arabic language television in Europe, as well as what viewers *say* that they are watching on television and why. The project described here aimed to fill in some of these gaps in knowledge, by providing both quantitative (questionnaire and media survey) data about Arabic speakers across Europe, followed by qualitative focus group work in order better to understand the complex connections between media use, cultural belonging and world views of those surveyed. The complexity of these connections are of course not particular to Arabic speakers; in a globalised world where media are digitized and mobile, complexity is commonplace. Gillespie's 'highly critical news consumers' are ubiquitous; but are European Arabic speaking audiences all of this kind?

London is a highly sophisticated media centre, with a wide range of Arabic print media and diverse sources of political and social orientations, with many politically active and critical Arabic television viewers. However there are very different sets of practices even within London and certainly across the EU. We noted certain patterns of media use through the quantitative data; observations which were reinforced with the qualitative data.

Preliminary quantitative findings

Our primary objective in the quantitative stage of the project was to map and quantify the use of Arabic language television, whether delivered by cable or satellite. We compared the use of Arabic language television in Arabic speaking households with the use of private and public national television in the relevant nation-states. It was originally planned to conduct a (proportionate) representative survey. However, the traditional strategies of defining representative samples could not be applied as detailed social demographic data of Arabic speaking migrants was not available in all the countries involved. France and Germany, notably, do not gather data about ethnic origin in the census.

A short questionnaire provided information on age, gender, education level, generation and dialect. We then asked about the use of media for news, the importance of local, transnational and Arabic media, and media practices. The total sample size of 2470 was obtained by a snowballing methodology. While there are striking differences across the sample space, there are also continuities. This report focuses on broad data and differences within the sample – finer grained detail will be available in the separate country reports to be published shortly (Figure 1).

One factor to be noted at the outset is that of the Arabic language itself. Those from the Maghreb, Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia, speak dialects of Arabic very different from those of the Middle East. Many of those who moved to the Netherlands were Berber speakers; a high proportion were illiterate. Middle Eastern forms of Arabic are themselves widely different. Those who are literate share modern standard forms of Arabic; the religious, classical Arabic. Many of the young, educated in Europe are not literate in Arabic; others can barely understand Arabic. Nevertheless there is a sense that Arabic speakers share, if not a pan-Arab *ummah*, a language and culture and sense of a shared televisual world. Nowhere is this more evident than during Ramadan when the breaking of the feast is frequently followed by viewing soap operas specially chosen for the period.

The dominant pattern of viewing was a combination of national television with Arabic language television across all countries. In the overall group we found that television was the preferred medium of nearly 70% of the sample, with Internet and newspapers equal second at less than 20% of the sample (Figure 2). There were predictable correlations between country of birth and preferred television channels (those born in Europe were less likely to prefer

Arabic language channels, and those born in Arabic countries prefer their national channels). There were less robust correlations between gender, occupation and viewing behaviour, with those older woman based at home more likely to watch Arabic television.

The second stage was a formal media diary. We measured the viewing of Arabic language TV channels by Arabic speakers in the six countries from November 24 2008: what channel and what genre they watched, when they watched it. The diary data are very rich and indicate a series of patterns that confirm the questionnaire data. The most watched Arabic language channel is Al Jazeera, except in Paris, followed by Al Arabiya. Informants rely on Al Jazeera and local (national) channels for news. For entertainment there is a typical mix of Egyptian satellite and local television, and for sport (except in Spain where Al Jazeera offers Moroccan soccer) local channels predominate.

What we did find that there are two *types* of Arabic speaking audience, one of which predominates in the three countries with a majority of North African immigrants from the Maghreb (France, Spain and Netherlands) and the other, with a range of Middle Eastern immigrants dominates the other capitals (UK, Sweden, Germany). The first group we tentatively described as "bicultural" in so far as viewing behaviour oscillated between local national channels (French, Spanish and Dutch respectively) and retransmitted local television of the country of family origin (chiefly Morocco and Algeria but also Tunisia). This pattern survived even in Paris, where a high proportion of Arabic speakers were locally born. The group typically visited the country of family origin at least once a year even when third generation citizens of their European home. The second group is more 'transnational' in so far as it was more ethnically mixed, more likely to watch the transnational channels, such as BBC Arabic, Al Jazeera, CNN, Al Arabiya. This group, which included a mix of refugees, students and long term residents was less likely to visit the country of origin.

Media practices and notions of belonging: the focus groups

The qualitative segment of the project took place over the summer of 2009. We conducted six focus groups in each country with two groups (male and female) of representatives of each generation, 18-24, 25-45, over 45. Each team consisted of research assistants fluent in Arabic, the local language and English, all of whom worked on the protocol with the project leaders over some months. Our aim was to enable those participating to discuss their media practices, not just television but also their use of Internet, newspapers, radio. We also trialled a range of

questions touching on sensitive issues of notions of belonging, identity, citizenship and civic engagement. The philosophical complexity of these focus groups were made evident as we developed translations for the various notions not just in standard Arabic but for the widely different dialects used.

The focus groups strengthen the impression of a multiple and complex forms of viewing behaviours. We found patterns of usage that we had predicted: the young are far more likely to use the Internet, women not working appear to watch more religious television. We also found a strong sense of community or family in viewing patterns. The television is, across the entire survey, a central feature of intergenerational family life, with all the complexities that brings.

The focus groups also reinforce a strong pattern of difference between the bicultural and transnational forms of engagement. While there are certainly those who are politically engaged living in Spain (one of whom was in fact himself a journalist), the Netherlands and France, the overwhelming impression is of media practices determined by families in a bicultural setting. So for instance in the Netherlands a young woman says,

> When we have visitors we only put Arabic or Moroccan channels on because it would be terribly embarrassing if all of a sudden there was a nude woman or people kissing on TV! (Female, Amsterdam 26-45)

In London we find evidence of Gillespie's critical media cosmopolitans,

> My parents see Arabic news completely but for politics I go to BBC. (Female, London, 26-45)

> The BBC, their technique is to sterilize the story, sterilize the story before you see it. (Male, London, 26-45)

In Berlin, the family was less dominant than in Paris, Amsterdam and Madrid; however

> When something happens, for example, a war in our countries or something like that, of course I go to my family and join them. (Male, Berlin, 18-24)

In terms of belonging, the bicultural citizens are accustomed to their dual sense of belonging, although well aware of the widespread prejudice against them as migrants, and aware that they are no longer entirely home in their country of origin

> I am a citizen of the Netherlands, because I fully participate in this society. I pay taxes, I work, I have insurance, I live here and my children go to school here. (Male, Amsterdam, 45+)

In Madrid most respondents were at home with the dual nationality

> It is wrong to ask if you are Arab or Spanish, you can be both. (Female, Madrid, 18-25)

London respondents, with those in Berlin and Stockholm, were far more likely to be explicit about a political pan-Arab identity.

> I do affiliate with this concept of the global Ummah, through the media and I never used to have that type of affiliation or association I think that has developed recently. (Male, London, 18-25)

And in Berlin

> We spend most of our time with Arabs. (Female, Berlin, 45+)

Cypriot focus groups remind us that over and above the classification of bicultural and transnational television viewing audiences, there is another grouping: those Mediterranean cultures of Europe where Arabic identity is integrated. Lebanese origin Cypriots, for instance, regard Arabic as another of the languages of the Mediterranean – a home language.

Conclusion

The short focus group reports below embody the complexities of the media environment of modern Europe. There are no longer monolithic national public spheres, in which the agenda for public debates can be set. Rather we have a range of more or less public, more or less private spheres, delivered via a globalized media infrastructure, Internet, satellite and individualized digital television platforms. The European public spheres – spaces in which EU policy are debated or Eurovision contested – overlap with a complex web of mediated

spaces: entertainment, news, music, sport; multilingual, multifaith, and politically diverse. Within that landscape exist the Arabic language mediated worlds we are describing. At this stage we offer only a mud map of a space worthy of careful cartography.

References

Georgiou, M (2006) (with R.Silverstone) 'Diaspora and Contra-flows beyond Nationcentricm' in D. Thussu (ed.) *Media on the Move.* London and New York: Routledge

Gillespie, Marie (2006) 'Transnational Television Audiences after September 11,' *Journal of Ethnic and Migration studies* 32:6 903-921

Gitlin, T. (1998). "Public sphere or public sphericules?" In T. Liebes & J. Curran (eds.), *Media, ritual, identity* London: Routledge, pp. 168-175.

Slade, Christina (2006) "Global private spheres and local public spaces" in ed Hipfl, Brigitte & Hug, Theo: *Media Communities*. Münster: Waxmann pp 95-121.

Sakr, N (2010) *Arab satellite media: where do we stand now,* Paper delivered 30/1/10 to the Cambridge Arab Media Project conference *Religious Broadcasting in the Middle East.*

Volkmer, Ingrid (2007) 'Governing the spatial 'reach'? Spheres of Influence and Challenges to Global Media Policy,' *International Journal of Communication* 1: 56-73.
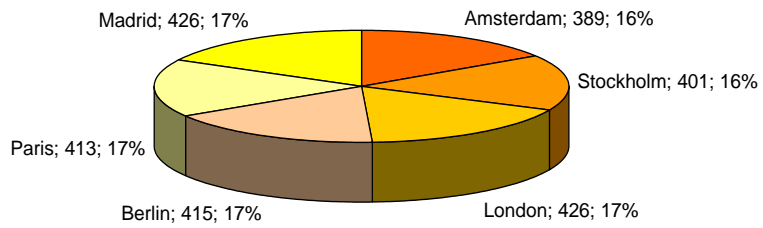
Figures for SLADE

Figure 1

Figure 2