

TRANSNATIONAL MEDIA AND CITIZENSHIP: ARABIC LANGUAGE TELEVISION IN EUROPE

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Globalization is transforming the political landscape and public discourse in both international legal terms and in terms of transnational media. Satellite, digital and cable delivery have challenged national boundaries. This paper deals with one aspect of the European transnational public sphere: the Arabic language media. An astonishing range, both national and transnational, is available: more than thirty Arabic television and radio channels, of which *Al Jazeera* is the transnational ‘representative’. Over the last decade, some such transnational public spheres have been researched (eg Matar, 2007) but there has been little attention to their critical role in advancing and promoting civic values. This paper inserts the issue of transnational media, in Arabic language in particular, into the vexed debate about citizenship in the European context.

Globalization is transforming the political landscape and public discourse in both international legal terms and in terms of transnational media. Whereas only decades ago, the ‘public’ was conceived as a sphere of national sovereignty, today’s flows of political communication are reshaping both the conception of the nation state and the understanding of the role of transnational media. As the EU expands to take in new member states, a new form of political entity, a transnational polity, has come into place. The ‘ideal public sphere’ of Habermasian theory, essentially a nation state within which democratic processes are theorised as a process of deliberation has a multi-national transformation – a transnational public sphere. In this new European transnational public sphere the European media environment has been utterly transformed: no longer monolingual it has become a fragmented set of sub national publics in self referential spheres. For instance, while the French elections of May 2007 have dominated French media, many French citizens will interpret and understand events in terms of the English, Spanish or Arabic media they share with citizens of other nations.

New media technologies not only challenge the concept of a national ‘public’ as a core terrain of European national identity formation but also question the conventional framework of ‘sovereignty’ itself. John Dewey argued that “in no two ages or places is there the same public,” (Dewey, 1927:33). Nevertheless a model of ‘the public sphere’ of democratic nation-states in Europe assumed a single type of public and in a univocal style of public discourse. Such public discourse represents a sphere of communication which is structured, organized and enforced within the state. A traditional model of national sovereignty of ‘public’ spaces of debate is still in place as the democratic ideal across the European members of the Union. This notion of sovereignty has shaped the public service broadcasting system (with different

traditions in each European country), regulates foreign investments in national media, and drives restrictions on foreign in-flow of programs.

The globalization of media is undermining the control of media and of the public spaces by the nation state. Volkmer (2007:59) argues that the “global public space” of political communication constitutes a new layer to the still nebulous domain of a ‘European public sphere’. Yet the altered boundaries of the national public sphere remain undertheorized. Reviewing recent academic debates about a European public sphere, trans-cultural public spheres across nation-states are rarely included. Supra- and subnational discourse spheres are not part of conceptual debates of the European public sphere. Integrating trans-cultural public discourses into a broad model of European ‘sovereignty’ has not yet been addressed, leading to a “democratic deficit” in Downey & Koenig’s (2006) terms. Downey & Koenig argue that while “the European Union is regularly presented as the leading example of cosmopolitan citizenship, it is also commonly asserted that it contains a “democratic deficit”, because system integration has greatly outpaced social integration.” They conclude that “the development of a European identity may prove to be just as exclusionary and uncivil as national identities have been historically” (Downey & Koenig, 2006:166). Others note: “If one looks for a genuinely transnational European public sphere, there is not much to be found” (Koopman & Erbe, 2004:99).

We suggest a reformulation of ‘European public sphere,’ replacing the image of a monolithic single sphere. We provide a model of “communicative flows” between “different political spaces” *within* a nation and across nations, with ‘global,’ ‘national’ or ‘local’ interacting with the transnational. Transnational public spheres come to the fore in the context of world crises and conflicts, in particular the war in Iraq (for example, Demesmay, 2006). However, we argue that they are ubiquitous. A globalized media infrastructure, with network structures of communication delivered via Internet, satellite and individualized digital television platforms, provides a new structure of a public communication space, which shapes new supra- and subnational public spheres.

Let us consider the example of foreign news. Just over two decades ago, ‘foreign’ news was selected by national broadcasters, who served as ‘gatekeepers’ for a national audience. The launch of cable systems and early period Direct-to-Home (DTH) satellite delivery (ASTRA, EUTELSAT) was a first phase of a transnational media space. The *BBC* and the German channel, *ARD*, became available across Europe, in Belgium and the Netherlands, for instance, while the Italian national channel, *RAI I*, was distributed in Germany. Already media and national boundaries were discontinuous. In the second phase of ‘transnationalization’ of news in the early nineties, non-European news channels, such as *CNN* inaugurated a new approach: targeting specifically transnational audiences with particular news programs and journalistic formats. In a third phase, the strategy of ‘connecting’ transnational audiences with ‘authentic’ programs was adopted by new emerging news outlets, creating an “extraterritoriality of state sovereignty” (Hassanpour, 1998:53). For instance *Med-TV* targeted Kurdish communities *across* Europe while *Al Jazeera* targeted an international audience of Arabic speakers.

Rai & Cottle (2007) survey the ownership and reach of the over one hundred global, regional, national and subnational 24 hour satellite news channels, and map their footprints. The world is hatched out with overlapping linguistic news worlds. Rai and Cottle that it would be a mistake to privilege the English language channels and describe multidirectional news flows. Viewed from a European perspective, these multidirectional news flows create diverse political viewpoints across Europe, no longer dominated by the national news agenda. They

shape new 'fragmented' communities, secluded from national public spheres yet connected to other communities in other nation states (Slade, 2006). For instance, Indian diaspora living in London, in Hamburg and in Madrid have access to numerous local, national and transnational South Asian media while the Nigerian communities living in London, Berlin and Athens develop their own transnational media online. Whereas the satellite provider EUTELSAT used to carry only around ten television programs targeting Russian, Polish, Rumanian, Turkish and other communities across Europe, today, around fifty-five television channels aim at Thai, Farsi, and Tamil audiences in Europe.

The Arabic speaking news space

The Arabic speaking news space within Europe is one of the most developed and most interesting of such spaces. The Arabic speaking news space has been transnational in nature since the invention of Modern Standard Arabic in Egypt in the early twentieth century. It was explicitly developed as a *lingua franca* for promulgating pan-Arabism and was designed specifically to be used in pan Arabic press (Holes, 2004). Thus, while the diasporic Arabic speakers living in Europe have a range of nationalities and of dialects, they do share a sense of identity as Arabic speakers. The street Arabic of Cairo, Baghdad and Marrakesh may be mutually incomprehensible dialects, but the language of the newspapers is a common tongue; as is the classical Arabic of the Koran. The diasporic Arabic speaking cultures share that transnational culture, in part through religion, but even more strikingly as a political outcome of pan-Arabism. The rise of transnational Arabic language television, and in particular of *Al Jazeera* (Miles, 2005), is witness to a pan-Arabic identity. The development of that transnational pan Arabic media space has spawned an extensive literature (eg. Ayish, 2003; Kepel 2005; Rugh, 2004; Sakr, 2002).

Arabic speakers in Europe access media in languages different from those of the host country. Some watch media from their homeland, others transnational stations, yet others national EU based programs in Arabic. Arabic media is received through a range of technologies, press, radio, television and internet are present in each different category above. The impact of these very different modes themselves differ. Our focus is on Arabic language satellite delivered content. Satellite delivered content is different from earlier technologies, most notably in its regulation. Within the EU, satellite feed is only regulated in the country in which it is uploaded. The complex process of understanding leading to participation in the society is thus no longer even in principle within national (or transnational EU) control. Arabic speakers in the EU share this transnational mediated public space, or a supra-national media world with other Arabic speakers in Europe and beyond. For instance, at the time of the murder of Theo van Gogh in Amsterdam, 31 Arabic language television channels were available in provincial Tilburg to Arabic speakers living in the Netherlands, including the Hisbollah *Al Manar* and a range of national Moroccan channels. Other channels included *Dubai TV*, 'transnational channels' for Arab communities, such as *MBC*, *Al Arabya*, 'spillover' channels, which serve sub-national communities *within* Arab nations and are just by coincidence available on the EUTELSAT footprint in Europe, such as *Berbère TV* and radio. Arabic speakers discussing the murder drew very much on the Arabic language media as in their interpretation of the murder, in a study done less than a month after the event (Slade, forthcoming).

Given the ubiquity of the Arabic speaking news sphere in Europe, it is surprising that sub-national public spheres are rarely debated within communication and media studies or journalism. Over the last decade, a small number of studies involve these new phenomena have, for instance, researched the role of Vietnamese media on Vietnamese communities

living in Australia, or Cypriots in London, Turkish in The Netherlands, Turkish in London and Berlin (e.g. Aksoy and Robins, 2001; Georgiou, 2006; Ogan, 2001). Others debate the fragmentation of national audiences and in fact of national public spheres into “public sphericules” as a consequence of the “centrifugal” power of the global information society (Gitlin, 1998:170). Still others argue that the use of ethnic programming contributes to ethnic and social isolation. Thomas Tufte (2003: 183, 192) denies this claim, asserting that the use of media from “territories of origin” does not “reflect a cultural isolation or regression towards the country of origin, but reflects the same sort of cultural ambivalence and ongoing identity negotiation generally taking place in each individual”.

National identities, citizenship and media

The impact of these new media ecologies, what we call sub and supra national news spaces, is of critical importance in debates about national identity. 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 possible. The ideal of a national public sphere in which debates of national import occur has passed. In a transnational space such as the European Union, this should not be a surprise; what is startling is the lack of recognition of the importance of media in the debate about immigration and integration of migrants.

The Hague Programme (2004) calls for integration as a key route for the solution of security issues in Europe. The document acknowledges the importance of education and knowledge about the host country in the process of integration, talking of access for immigrants to institutions as a mode of gathering knowledge. But the document is silent on the institutions which are among the primary sources of knowledge in modern societies: namely the media.

Over the last five years, a number of EU nations have reformed and tightened procedures for immigration and granting citizenship, including the Netherlands, UK, Germany and Italy, testing not merely for language capacities in prospective migrants, but also for cultural knowledge. These regimes are implicitly aimed to exclude security risks, and hence are particularly targeted at Islamic groups. In the French elections of 2007, immigration laws have played a controversial part. The initiative has now gained a transnational EU perspective. On March 23, 2007, following a meeting in northern Germany of the Interior Ministers of the then 25 member states, all immigrants to Europe could be required to sit a test demonstrating their knowledge of the host country. The explicit aim of broadening the test had been explained in a report on an earlier meeting by Charles Clarke, the UK Home Secretary:

What we agreed very strongly was that the values of our societies – democracy, respect for other faiths, free speech, the rule of law, free media and so on - are values which we would expect everyone wanting to settle in these countries to respect. (Watson, 2006)

Citizenship testing regimes, with their emphasis on values, assume cultural understandings which, in some cases, could only be drawn from media. The Netherlands for instance has introduced a pre-immigration test asking prospective immigrants outside Europe about their knowledge of the Netherland. The assumption of prior learning is predicated on a globalised and mediatised world.

There is extensive literature on citizenship and cultural identity, ranging from Anderson’s (1983) notions of imagined communities, Miller’s (1993) through Kylimicka *et al* (2000) and Stevenson (2002). We draw a contrast between ‘bare citizenship’: citizenship conceived as the

legal relationship between a nation state and its citizens, circumscribed by international law; and broader notions of cultural citizenship is central. Weiner (1998:11) contrasts the European ideal of citizenship as ‘identity generating and community building’ with a set of minimal political rights. Habermas, in his discussion of the question of a European constitution (2001), distinguishes between citizens held together by ethnic identity, and nations held together in the juristically neutral sense of “state-constituting peoples”. He argues that modern democracy requires a more abstract neutral form of political participation suggests that “the multicultural self-understanding of the nations of citizens formed in classical countries of immigration ... is more instructive ... than that derived from the culturally assimilationist French model” (2001:159-160). In fact new forms of citizenship testing are moving in the opposite direction.

In drawing a distinction between bare citizenship, and stronger variants of cultural citizenship, we locate the role of the media not merely as an actor in the development of cultural citizenship, but as a player in the formal notions of citizenship itself. Much of the debate surrounding citizenship testing appears to assume that citizenship is a one-to-one relationship between a state and an individual, in the sense of a bare formal relationship, but slides to a stronger claim that a citizen should have a unique cultural relationship to the nation state. In the conclusion of a project on the nexus between integration, immigration and citizenship Carrera remarks on the tension between formal notions of citizenship and cultural belonging, pointing out that the EU has not addressed that tension.

In the evolving EU framework on the integration of immigrants, a fierce struggle is taking place between the overall approach presented under the EU framework for the integration of immigrants, and the actual legally binding acts produced by a common immigration policy. (Carrera, 2006: 4)

Our contention is that media have a critical role not only in ‘mediating’ the nation (Madianou, 2005) but in perceptions of citizenship and civic values. The influence of education, of religion, of values, in the development of cultural citizenship have been much discussed. However European debates about transnational and national citizenship rarely focus on media and communications. Media policy in the European Union lags behind technological development and still focuses on regulation at the national and EU level. It is indicative that the policy framework of *Television without Frontiers* (TWF1989) is still essentially in place. Even when in 2003 the Commission launched a wide public consultation on the TWF Directive it was concluded that:

The Television without Frontiers Directive is the cornerstone of the EU's audiovisual policy.....In the light of the results of the consultation procedure, the Commission concludes that the current situation of the market does not require a re-examination of the Directive in the short term. However, in the medium term, a thorough revision of the Directive might be necessary to take account of the technological developments and changes in the structure of the audiovisual market (European Commission, 2003).

Yet technology has outpaced the possibility of ruling on the issues at the heart of *Television without frontiers*: advertising and content, for instance. Satellite delivered material is no longer susceptible to the older regulatory frameworks. We highlight the policy issues which are at the heart of a new television policy – the transnational media spheres and their impact on the information available to minorities in EU states, and the intractability of these issues to national legislative regimes.

In developing an understanding of the role of media in the process of integration, we draw new connections across the conceptual space of citizenship studies, and recast our understanding of the mediated worlds of EU citizens. The reconceptualisation has multilevel impacts, at the level of analysis and reframing of the issues of integration and citizenship in the EU, at the level of policy, and in particular media and citizenship policy in the EU, and at the level of data and commercial practice in the television industry. It draws on the Arabic speaking community itself for input at every level of the process, thus creating a new space of public debate in the European Union.

And not just of the European Union. New spaces of debate have opened across the world, even in Australia where, as Rai and Cottle (2007) note, satellite access is less pervasive than in Europe. In Australia, as we consider introducing a citizenship testing regime, we are replicating much of the European debate. Discussion about citizenship has been in the context of theorizing and legal structures which are essentially national in framework. Even more than in the European Union, Australia has insisted on its national boundaries. By reminding legislators and policy makers of the importance of mediated communication in the creation of culture, we remind policy makers that citizenship, both in the bare legal sense, and in a broader sense of cultural citizenship, is no longer a purely national matter.

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