Methods for Studying Non-U.S. Television

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Media and cultural studies research rely on a few basic factors for success: access to primary material- films, television shows, literature; access to secondary sources: academic writing, reviews, relevant literature; access, if this is the methodology one chooses, to audience members; access to producers, financiers, distributors; and lastly access to and familiarity with the cultural/social/political environment in which the media in question produces effects. As an American scholar of Arabic-language culture and media I encounter difficulties with these basic factors not faced by my colleagues who focus on American or even European media.

In attempting to study culture in the contemporary Arabic speaking world the most pressing research difficulty, one that affects all others, is a fundamental cultural difference regarding information dissemination. Despite substantial cynicism towards the contemporary press, American society tends towards sharing of information and opinions, especially in scholarly or scientific areas. In Egypt, where I do most of my research, on the other hand, information tends to be either a commodity to be bargained with or an opinion to be concealed. This is an outcome of historical restrictions on political and economic freedom that have left many scrambling for diminished resources as well as of an education system that discourages the dissemination of critical thought.

In the best of times, then, research on Egyptian culture is difficult. These are not the best of times. In the contemporary environment, in the wake of the Arab uprisings, political instability and radical Islamism, access to information and freely-expressed opinions is even more difficult. Structurally, the Egyptian government's fear of political instability and their targeting of journalists and academics makes studying sensitive areas (religious extremism, government opposition, security) downright dangerous. (This is especially the case for a dual-citizen like myself.) But this attitude also spreads to the population, making the free expression of opinion about culture and politics even more difficult. In the current political climate that animates much of the Arabic-speaking world, a profound (and not unjustified) distrust of Western forms of knowledge-production means that even getting physical access to governmental broadcasting institutions is nigh impossible. Further, probing and politically discomfiting questions (what other kinds could there be, now?) makes speaking to non-official cultural sources fraught and anxious.

On the positive side, the increasingly globalized and digitized communication systems that link much of the world offer access to a wealth of primary cultural material that would have been impossible to access even ten years ago. It is now possible to consume and study distant cultural material even from a remote location like Walla Walla, WA. Further, social media brings attention to relevant players in the field and contemporary communication technologies makes sharing and gathering information possible across great distances.

However, the distance-killing effect of contemporary communication can lull us into a false sense of knowledge about a cultural other. Put simply, watching Egyptian television in the Pacific Northwest can give me vital information and provide a useful space for analysis, but it is simply not equivalent to watching the same program in Cairo. As Stuart Hall taught us long ago, the unspoken context, the mediated environment, are as crucial to encoding meaning in a cultural text as the text itself. Constant exposure, then, to the mediated environment of study is crucial in cultural analysis and, for those who study physically distant cultures, provides a further problem of funding and research time.

Once the resources are compiled, the site visits undertaken, the information gathered and analyzed then comes the most significant difficulty, at least for my research: translation. By translation I mean making the cultural, social and political issues under analysis available for wider consumption. There are various levels of audiences to which this information could be relevant, complicating the process of translation. There is, of course, the small community of scholars and intellectuals who are interested in the specific research area: Arabic film or television; there is a wider community of scholars and intellectuals who are interested in similar topics but in different regions; there are even wider groups of scholars from similar disciplines or study similar geographical regions; there are students who come into the topic with no background at all; and lastly there is a general audience of concerned citizens who most profoundly need this kind of information about a supposed civilizational other.

At each level of generalization- starting with like-minded researchers and ending with the general public- some element of detail is necessarily lost in the translation. The complexity of politics, social formations and history of, say, the representation of religious fundamentalism in a 1990's Egyptian film requires a deeper analytical familiarity than a general audience is ready for. As a scholar at a small liberal arts college, my primary concern is with finding the right level of translation of the complexity of Arab social life to intelligent students who have no experience in the area. I approach these problems by never attempting to relay knowledge about the object of study, Arab culture, until I have created the theoretical context in which we can begin to understand the history and complexity of encountering difference in the US. So before a student ever sees an Middle Eastern film, they spend the first half of the semester learning about the representation of gender, ethnic and religious minorities, and the history of representation of Arabs and Muslims in the US media.