

Rebuilding Egyptian Media for a Democratic Future

By Ramy Aly

Mediating ‘the Nation’: from State to Public Service Broadcasting, critically engaging Egypt as a complex society.

The protests around Tahrir Square and other urban areas in Egypt represented a revolutionary moment in which the class, sectarian, gender and regional fractures and dynamics of Egyptian society were temporarily suspended. The protests, which were driven by a number of political and socio-economic factors, were significantly a rejection of the social and cultural consequences of life in the shadow of authoritarianism. Most Egyptians have been alienated from political participation and from an iterative relationship with the state and its institutions through an inclusive public sphere. The atmosphere of common purpose, free expression, tolerance and inclusion experienced by protesters between January 25 and February 11 has already led to significant changes in attitudes and practices around the ownership of public space, freedom of expression and the right to mobilize. For many, one of the most promising potentials of the revolution lies in the prospect that it might lead to a fundamental cultural re-imagining of the nation, of difference, inclusion and citizenship. However, the manner in which the revolutionary moment is now subject to cultural narrativization and canonization suggests the persistence of particular representation practices which should be met with caution.

Egypt’s media environment (both state and privately owned) offers a good vantage point from which to consider some of the discourses and practices which have led to the alienation, invisibility and misrepresentation of large swathes of Egyptian society within the public sphere. Egypt has inbuilt limits on media participation and representation that are hugely consequential with reference to the inclusions, exclusions and forms of representation that constitute public spheres. In spite of the ostensible media liberalization which Egypt has undergone in the last decade, television broadcasting in Egypt remains subject to the stranglehold of the state on the one hand and co-opted religious and commercial elites on the other. A logonomic system prescribing legitimate discourse and representation has calcified around these nodes of production which in turn have come to control the behavior of the producers of these discourses and the expectations of potential consumers who consequently participate in sustaining and reconstituting these genres (Hodge and Kress 1988).

While there is significant activity and cultural production within counter-publics, the extent to which attempts to break established genres, modes of representation and expression are deemed illegitimate by an elitist, centralized and securitized approach to “culture” has meant that counter-publics have been kept at arm’s length and considered not as legitimate ground-up modes of expression, but as ignominious and menacing. This is well demonstrated by Sabry Hafez, who charts the way in which new Egyptian novelists who have sought to capture the complex linguistic, social and political landscape have been subjected to sustained campaigns of condemnation by the literary and cultural establishment (2010). Such a reading goes well with the idea of language as the site of social and class struggle, as advocated by Mikhail Bakhtin, who argued that centripetal authoritative discourses ‘which represent the forces of political centralization, a unified cultural canon and a dominant national discourse are in constant tension and intersection with centrifugal marginalized and ‘inwardly persuasive discourses’ and genres associated with subordinated groups in society marked by class, age, religion, gender and race’ (Maybin 2001: 65-66).

The way in which these tensions are played out is not only in textual confrontations but also in cultural practices. This can be seen in the way that the practice of saint veneration at *Moulids* (annual celebrations of the saint's day) has come under various pressures from a state and a conservative religious current with an abrasive understanding of modernism and reformism. There have been attempts to constrict these events through the deployment of politico-religious authority that conceives *Moulids* in aesthetic terms as representing ‘civic’ oppositions such as ‘cleanliness and filth, order and chaos, and calm and noise’ (Scheilke 2008: 550) or in relation to conservative religious readings which frame these practices in terms of *bid’a* (heretical innovation) and *shirq* (polytheism). Within a political and legal framework which acts as the arbitrator of public morality and decency, this configuration is far more ominous than being simply a matter of the politics of taste or the aristocracy of culture. Instead it represents class struggle, a fundamental intolerance towards difference and strong evidence of the corporeal power of discourse.

The freedom to interrogate and challenge established genres and modes of representing gender, age, geography, piety, class, respectability and nationalism have been vigorously policed and regulated in Egypt, resulting in a discursive terrain of subjection whose reiterations produce ‘that which they name’ (Butler 1990, 1993). Through the stylized repetition of speech and bodily acts, social intelligibility and legitimacy in Egypt are inscribed and prescribed. In the process the complexity of subjectivity and society is flattened and made to fit into simplistic yet authoritative linguistic representations, metaphors and

tropes, the most violent of which I argue is the notion of *al-shakhsiyya al-masriyya* or the (quintessential) Egyptian Character, which has been used as the fuel of jingoism and ethno-nationalism on the one hand and to prescribe social intelligibility on the other.

Al-shakhsiyya al-masriyya has become one of the technologies of power and governmentality, representing a kind of biologically deterministic approach to Egyptian society, whereby certain types of women and men are produced through fixed notions of citizenship, belonging, gender, class, religion and social stratification. Lila Abu Lughod (2005) lucidly demonstrates the central role of mass media, the culture industries and in particular soap operas as (national) pedagogic mechanisms for the reproduction of an authentic Egyptian subject. Tartoussieh points to the way in which this ‘pedagogical approach to art and culture blurs the national with the cultural, spoon-feeding the image of the ‘real’ Egyptian as a good citizen and a pious Muslim’ (2010: 9). A self-referential discourse has fueled this style of production in both the state and private sectors, where simplistic and simplifying scripts, sets and acting are seen as the best way to engage a simple and simplistic audience that is only interested in a particular genre of rhetorical pseudo-realism.

These production and representational styles not only make for poor quality drama but have led to large swathes of Egyptian society either remaining invisible or being misrepresented within the national public sphere. Egypt’s 47.5 million rural inhabitants are a case in point. While constituting over half of Egypt’s population, it is rare to see the Egyptian countryside or its people depicted on national or private television beyond stereotypical depictions in the hyper-unreality of soap operas, or as the happy and colorful people of liquid soap and home-care advertisements. Rural people are typically never played by rural actors, as such a constituency is thought not to exist. They are routinely depicted as honor-driven, violent, patriarchal simpletons by urbanite scriptwriters and actors whose attempts to represent *Sai’di*s rarely do more than add to the freeze-framing of rural people and rural life as quintessentially and predictably parochial and authentically backward. Even after the revolution it remains almost unthinkable to imagine a weekly program on rural life broadcast on channel one (Al-Oula), with a rural presenter, speaking in his or her accent without apology or *la mu’akhatha* (pardon me) - the standard reminder that all things rural are to be considered uncouth and subordinate.

Similarly, Nubians and the Bedouins of Sinai, the Eastern and Western deserts are rarely given any attention, apart from reluctant references to them on the state television news broadcasts where their political and economic “demands” are spoken about with vague incredulity. After years of exposure to this exclusive and unrepresentative public sphere one

might be forgiven for thinking that these groups have no legitimate place within the nation's cultural sense of self, no music, poetry or popular culture of their own, no history and no future which is worthy of being shared with the rest of society. While some of these groups are crudely advertised *to* as part of Egypt's consumer market or advertised *as* part of its tourist attractions, they are rarely given the respect they deserve in terms of a share of public broadcasting. Religious groups such as Christians, Baha'is and Shi'ites are the preserve of discussions where national culture, national unity and national security are seen as going hand-in-hand and where anecdotes of ethnic and religious harmony are exchanged between guests and presenters who continue to insist that sectarianism and discrimination are not systematic or institutional in Egypt.

The endemic negligence in relation to regional, ethnic and religious diversity on television is matched only by the disregard of the class structure and poverty within Egypt. The millions of Egyptians who live in shanty towns within and around greater Cairo and every other major city in the country, without government services or basic utilities such as water and sanitation have to date been almost totally ignored by the 19 state-run channels. In recent years only one program, hosted by Amr Al-Laithi on the privately run 'Dream' network, set out to investigate and bring into people's living rooms the full dreadfulness of Egypt's urban deprivation. What is clear is that a particular televisual culture has meant that many groups are subject to one-dimensional programming where they are restricted to particular discursive frames. Lest the point be misunderstood, what is being suggested here is not that there should be a philanthropic turn towards marginalized groups by state-owned and private television, or that Egypt should engage in corporatist identity politics so that these constituencies are further framed only in terms of political and economic problems for the nation. Instead a balance must be found whereby programming on national as well as local and private channels seeks to reflect the social and cultural vibrancy and creativity of these groups as well and include them within the principal shared medium of the nation: national television.

True to its common name, programming on '*Television al-dawla*' (state Television) rarely seems to reflect Egypt's people or their culture. Even after the fall of the Mubarak regime it continues to reflect the public relations needs of the military council and the transitional government. Its small news, public information and current affairs programming remain unimaginative, unattractive and have not departed in any significant way from the syntax of deference to authoritarianism and crude nationalism. What remains of 'state' broadcasting in the form of the Egyptian Radio and Television Union (ERTU) is now paralyzed by economic and institutional problems. The abolition of the Ministry of Information comes with no

guarantees that the fundamental shift in purpose and institutional culture at the ERTU will take place, at a time where Egyptians are most acutely in need of high quality public service broadcasting. At the core of Public Service Broadcasting is the responsibility to reflect the different cultures, concerns and constituencies of the nation, and not to do so in ways that are exclusionary, centralized and securitized.

The revolution poses a number of questions about the Egyptian state's institutional and legislative future, which in turn lead to questions about the relationship between broader cultural conditions and the process of reconstituting the state in the aftermath of a revolutionary moment. At what point do dominant cultural values and practices, social norms and styles of representation begin to restrict the realization of basic freedoms and modes of expression among disparate subjectivities and groups within society? Importantly in relation to the media, when do these established cultural norms prevent Public Service Broadcasting and the media more broadly from seeing Aswan, Sinai, Sohag and Alexandria as being of equal importance to the nation as Cairo? When do these cultural norms become an obstacle to airtime and programming opportunities for different religious, class, geographical, age and sub-culture groups? Television gives us a sense of society and self and if marginalized groups are invisible, it matters. While some may sound a cautious note that behind such a question is a sinister form of cultural imperialism and Orientalism; we must be equally conscious not to orientalize ourselves or place too much confidence in cultural relativism, negating the commonality of the cultural change within all contexts where access to rights and recognition is enshrined in legislation. The racism, discrimination, sexism, regionalism and class-based disadvantage that mark Egyptian society have in other contexts been the subject of protective rights-based legislation while at the same time being fundamentally encrypted in cultural repertoires and structures which are everywhere seen as authentic, arboreal and sacred. We are still left with the challenge that the revolutionary moment has created a expectation that new institutional arrangements, forms of engagement, participation and representational practices will be created within a public sphere that will live up to the cultural expectations of Egypt's revolution.

So far, in the weeks after the fall of the regime, the project of mediating post-revolutionary nation building in new and creative ways has largely been left to private satellite channels, most notably ONTV, which has embarked on a concerted set of public information campaigns around politics, participation and civic responsibility. While the private sector is to be commended for this, it should be noted that ONTV may represent not the rule but an exception to the profit- and advertising-driven private media in Egypt. Commercial channels

have and must be subject to regulations that require them to play a role in public service broadcasting. However, as Elsässer (2010) has shown in relation to media liberalization and sectarianism in Egypt, the increasing range of religious channels and Christian and Muslim websites and new media platforms has in the most led to further entrenchment, antagonism and discrimination. The ‘shared ideas, interests and aspirations of Muslims and Copts [for example] as Egyptian citizens do not figure in the discourse of transnational religious satellite channels and internet portals’ (Elsässer 2010: 147).

Deregulation and liberalization may offer broadcasting to an increasing number of single-interest groups but is likely to do very little in relation to mediating the nation post-revolution. Public Service Broadcasting has a unique remit in this regard and should seek to address the need for shared space to promote shared interests and values, helping to forge an inclusive and empowering mainstream. While this will require major institutional and legal restructuring that transforms Egypt’s state broadcasting into public service broadcasting, it will also take a fundamental shift in the way that Egypt sees and represents itself and a radical departure from the discourses, modes of production and representation that have disenfranchised so many by ignoring, simplifying and patronizing - ultimately reproducing a divisionary and hierarchical cultural vision of the nation. The revolutionary moment requires a new vision of the future, a task made all the more difficult by the widespread attachment and confidence in the social configurations of the past. Echoing throughout Tahrir Square and now on the airwaves of satellite channels are the words of Sheikh Imam “*ya Misr oudi zay zaman*” (Oh Egypt return to your former self) – a testament to a nostalgic yearning for an imagined and romanticized past that is often debilitating to attempts to make sense of the present and imagine the future. While nostalgia at times of crisis is by no means unique to Egypt or the Arab world, Egypt’s revolutionary moment will certainly remain unrealized if, as Sabiha Al Kheimir (1993) persuasively puts it, we ‘wait in the future for the past to come’.

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