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How universalised language misconstrues audiences in the “Middle East”

Naomi Sakr

Anyone researching audiences in the region that is routinely but unhelpfully labelled “the Middle East and North Africa” faces several challenges. Not least is the misleading homogenisation implied the acronym, MENA, which is why this chapter mostly refers to the area henceforth as Southwest Asia and North Africa, thereby also avoiding the Eurocentric postulation of a “middle” east. Beyond that are the sparsity of academic studies and a decades-old lack of credible market research, both ultimately caused by difficulties of access and sampling that, along with the dominance of pro-government monopolies, are symptomatic of the authoritarian governance that prevails across the countries covered here. Insofar as these features indicate how audiences in those countries are viewed and valued, they form the focus of the chapter. Underlying the analysis, however, is a concern with the language used to describe processes that audience research involves, such as measuring media use, gauging audience opinions and examining the media-audience relationship in terms of media responsiveness and accountability. The study begins by reflecting on whether terminology that is standard in certain settings still has the same meaning when applied to other political systems, where it risks disguising daily injustices such as those imposed on people living in autocracies. The term ‘autocracy’ applies to all Arab countries and Iran (V-Dem Institute, 2022: 45), which are the focus here, with some classed as ‘electoral autocracies’ for failing to meet minimal standards in terms of free and fair elections, freedom of expression and association, while ‘closed autocracies’ are run by an individual or group whose power is largely unconstrained by the people (V-Dem Institute, 2022: 13). The chapter goes on to reflect in turn on the appropriateness of terms customarily adopted to discuss

audience-media relations, audience measurement and media market dynamics and finally to probe opinion pollsters' own assessment of regional opinion research. Its conclusion relates the use of universalised terminology in this sphere to preservation of the status quo.

Contradictions in terms

Scholars have already delved into the shaping of discourses about audiences in countries that do not share the “same cultural traditions” as modern Western Europe and North America (Butsch and Livingstone, 2014: 2). It has been argued that words and discourses “really matter” because “representations may become a means of social control” (Butsch and Livingstone, 2014: 9). In the same volume that contains this introduction, Joe Khalil (2014: 112) prefaces his exploration of Arabic and English words used to denote Arab audiences with a telling anecdote, in which survey methods regarded as unexceptional in some parts of the world engender suspicion and guarded, instrumentalist responses when adopted in Morocco. Informed by the notion that words may become a means of control and that “terms can be limited and limiting in explaining different cultural, historical, economic or social experiences” (Khalil, 2014: 111), it is worth testing the notion, put forward by journalist and anthropologist Joris Luyendijk in making sense of his experience as a reporter in the “Middle East”, that fundamental, systemic differences between dictatorships and non-dictatorships mean that words commonly used in reporting on dictatorships are actually “contradictions in terms” (Kester, 2008: 501, 504). Thus, for example, the kind of journalism that checks facts through multiple sources is not possible in countries where people cannot risk their names being linked to anything other than the official version of events. Hence “in a police state” what is elsewhere commonly called journalism becomes a “contradiction in terms” (Luyendijk, 2010: 240).

That is to say: we may need to interrogate not only the terms applied to audiences in the context of autocracy but also the terms conventionally associated with audience studies. Such interrogation aligns with John B. Thompson's recognition (1990: 62) that "displacement" constitutes an example of "dissimulation" strategies, which maintain relations of domination by concealing, denying or obscuring realities in a way that "deflects attention from or glosses over existing relations or processes". He notes how, through displacement, a "term customarily used to refer to one object or individual is used to refer to another, and thereby the positive or negative connotations of the term are transferred to the other object or individual" (Thompson, 1990: 62). Relations of domination in this case could refer to the power of autocratic governments over their "citizens" (another questionable word that glosses over the overwhelming denial of political and civil rights in autocracies) but also to that of Western commentators, whose labelling has been said to typify a way of "dominating, restricting, and having authority over the Orient" (Avery 2021). For Edward Said, Orientalism meant that the very labels "Arab" and "Muslim" were "so overdetermined by history, religion and politics" that "no one today can use them without some attention to the formidable polemical mediations that screen the objects, if they exist at all, that the labels designate" (Said, 2000: 348). Theories of Eurocentrism and Orientalism have been used to support an argument to the effect that European and Western knowledge production universalizes concepts about human societies and is thereby "embedded in a project of western global domination" that represents certain peoples and societies as "always in need" of Western intervention or help (Shihade, 2012: 57-60).

The point here is not to allege some dark conspiracy of domination but simply to entertain the possibility that the use of what has become a global audience studies lexicon may, by inadvertently or lazily obscuring the nature of power relations in dictatorships, contribute to perpetuating them. The lexicon's normality in western-led commentary may, through

misapplication, serve to normalize repression. It is not surprising that the commentary is western led when businesses and organisations based in North America and Europe are prominent in various aspects of Arab media industries, from content production and distribution to market research and opinion polling, as will be shown. The remainder of this chapter compares terms with examples of the realities of practice in parts of Southwest Asia and North Africa. Picking up on the risks, mentioned above, that deter media users in the 2020s from volunteering critical information, or even ‘liking’ or sharing certain social media posts for fear of negative consequences under the digital surveillance now in place (eg Amnesty International, 2023), the first section considers the applicability of concepts relating to user agency, including the idea that media outlets act as watchdogs on audiences’ behalf.

Voice, agency and accountability

Basic notions such as media user voice and agency require close scrutiny when applied in autocratic settings. Expectations that blogs, video-sharing and other social media would amplify the space for alternative expression to challenge the status quo were crushed by the rampant “digital authoritarianism” (eg Jones, 2022) that followed the 2009 Green Movement in Iran and the Arab uprisings in 2010-11. The Reporters sans frontières World Press Freedom Index testifies to a dramatic increase in repression in countries across the region taking place between the mid- to late-2000s and early 2020s. The outcome is that residents of those countries, who include large numbers of often-marginalised expatriate workers in parts of the Gulf, displaced people from Syria and Iraq in the East Mediterranean or African refugees and migrants in North Africa, cannot rely on seeing themselves or their preoccupations reflected in local media. Where the latter surface in foreign outlets it is despite the impediments to journalism mentioned above, such as reluctance of sources to come forward or be named, along with the risk of deportation as has happened to reporters with mainstream international media in Egypt (eg Sakr, 2021: 397), the United Arab Emirates

(UAE), Algeria, Morocco, Lebanon and elsewhere in incidents monitored by the Committee to Protect Journalists in New York.

There are many layers to the silencing of ordinary people's voices in countries like the UAE or Egypt, which contradict their claims to be hospitable tourism and business destinations.

One layer arises through positive-sounding titles used to camouflage the silencing process.

The UAE has a Ministry of Tolerance, created at minister of state level in 2016, elevated to a full ministry in 2017 and renamed Ministry for Tolerance and Co-existence in 2022.

Tolerance in this case does not extend to enabling residents to talk publicly about ways to cut living costs. When, in June 2022, a local news outlet, *Al-Roeya* (The Vision), interviewed Emirati nationals who had driven across the border to obtain cheaper fuel in Oman, the story it produced was deleted from the website within hours and never appeared in print (Debre 2022). Isabel Debre's report on the episode for Associated Press, published three months later and based on anonymous sources, probed multiple state actions through which the cover-up was achieved. These included suspensions and questioning of news staff, forced resignations and non-disclosure agreements, followed by the closure of *Al-Roeya*, with the latter portrayed as a long-planned rebranding of its news operation as CNN Business Arabic. Keeping silent about these actions was easy for *Al-Roeya*'s owner, International Media Investments (IMI).

Based in the UAE's biggest and richest emirate, Abu Dhabi, IMI owns Sky News Arabia and the English-language daily *The National* and is itself owned by the UAE president's brother, who also owns England's Manchester City football club. Silence was meanwhile deemed the safest option by non-Emirati Arab journalists working at *Al-Roeya*, whose UAE residence permits are linked to employment. Institutions for whom silence was presumably optional, notably CNN and the UAE Journalists Association, chose not to elaborate on IMI's official account of events (Debre 2022).

Where does silencing on this scale leave the concept of audience agency? Studies in other authoritarian contexts have noted that distrust in news and consequent news avoidance may reflect a process of news negation, based on the argument about a lack of agency, namely that “there’s really no point knowing because there’s really nothing much you can do about it” (quoted in Hill and Dahlgren 2023: 128). But the corollary of negation is intense engagement with the potential of news to inform citizens (Hill and Dahlgren 2023: 112). Thus an understanding of human agency calls for recognition that media engagement straddles tensions between the rational and emotional (Hill and Dahlgren 2023: 17). Scholars of Arab media have rarely addressed the question of agency, no doubt because of obvious limitations on what media users are allowed to know and why they can do about it. Writing in 2016 about the top-down viewpoint of media executives in pan-Arab television entertainment, Joe Khalil detected a possible – albeit “incomplete” – shift on their part towards a recognition of “viewer agency”, driven by perceived audience dissatisfaction with homogenised fare beamed to an entire region and a corresponding trend towards localised production (Khalil, 2016: 3632-3633). Even then, however, Khalil was aware of “uncertainties” affecting his argument (2016: 3642). Soon afterwards uncertainties were removed. In March 2018, after seizing a majority stake in MBC, the leading pan-Arab TV network, the Saudi government ordered it to axe all Turkish television drama series instantly, displaying complete disregard for their huge popularity with Arab audiences (Sakr, 2023a: 34) and effectively appropriating viewer agency, already subordinated to the government’s domestic preoccupation with its own survival, to serve additional foreign policy ends. The order (reversed four years later) reflected Saudi Arabia’s objections to Turkish support for Qatar, which Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt all boycotted from 2017. Egypt and UAE also pulled Turkish content, something both countries could readily achieve through their centralised state media ownership. In Egypt a whole raft of production companies and press and audiovisual outlets

were taken over by government-controlled bodies masquerading as private companies in a transfer process that began in 2016 (Sakr 2023b: 129).

However, as necessitated by viewers' skill in locating online platforms where they could continue to watch the banned Turkish serials, sometimes with English subtitles in place of the dubbing into Syrian dialect they had enjoyed on MBC, perceptions of media users' agency vary according to where and how you look for it. As Dounia Mahloully puts it in relation to the "social media sphere" (2023: 20), informed by her research on Egypt, Lebanon and Tunisia, a debate that overlooks the "perspective of the audience" fails to explain how "audiences navigate the hegemonic framework of this media to gain agency in creative ways." Mahloully argues that "dystopian fears" generated by concerns over populism, disinformation and a crisis of public trust in Western neoliberal societies are linked to "Eurocentric assumptions about the communication practices that should contribute to democratization", including "regulating alternative communication channels" (2023: 3, 18, 114). She warns that such fears can "limit our understanding of informal communication in other parts of the world", where it is a "bottom-up process of communicative resilience and social creativity" on the part of those who "find themselves excluded, marginalized or misrepresented in the official public discourse" (2023: 27, 29). Yet, because informal communication is a "constantly regenerating process", Mahloully notes that experiences of communicative agency in the context of oppression are "usually short-lived" (2023: 24, 27).

The multiplicity of factors preventing ordinary people across the region from influencing media content, let alone getting their voices heard, makes reliable evidence on the extent to which audiences trust their media or hold them accountable hard to come by. In a look back at five years of surveys it conducted between 2013 and 2017, Northwestern University's campus in Qatar (NU-Q, 2017: 38) recorded a decline over that period in the proportion of people in Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the UAE who agreed with the statement "The media in

this country can report the news independently without interference from officials”, but added in small print that answers to this statement were not collected in Egypt or Qatar.

Indeed, it could be argued that, in a dictatorship, any notion of media accountability as understood in non-autocratic political systems becomes a contradiction in terms. That may be why literature on the topic tends to be prescriptive or, in one case, to show why prescriptions conceived in Western neoliberal settings can end up serving authoritarian ends. In her 2020 report entitled *Public Media Accountability*, Abeer al-Najjar concludes that accountability is a sensitive issue in relation to pan-Arab media because of rising threats to reporters.

Conceding that the influence of rare exposés and satire in encouraging “critical exchange” has yet to be assessed, she can only urge that such critiques should be encouraged along with critical media literacy (Najjar, 2020: 17-18). Judith Pies, on the other hand, reflecting on more than a decade’s worth of comparative studies of European and other media accountability mechanisms, finds herself compelled to consider whether the concept of media accountability, defined by Claude-Jean Bertrand (2000: 107) as “any non-state means of making media responsible towards the public”, has meaning in non-democracies. Concerned that the concept is used not only to “*produce* knowledge on media-society relations” but also to influence development work backed by international donors, Pies shows how co-called media accountability instruments in Jordan are implemented in reality not by non-state actors but by the regime (Pies, 2023: 84, emphasis in original, 88). As a result she is sure the concept does not work in non-democratic states. She writes: “Contrary to its original meaning, the instruments seemed to function as another ‘smart’ authoritarian mechanism, and not as a safeguard of or enhancement for freedom” (Pies, 2023: 88).

Audience measurement, advertising and media markets

It is not unusual for certain countries in Southwest Asia and North Africa to be described as “emerging markets.” Categorised by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) as somewhere between the world’s “advanced” and “developing” economies, emerging markets’ typical attributes are said to be “sustained market access, progress in reaching middle-income levels, and greater global economic relevance”, which puts Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the UAE under this heading, with Qatar disqualified only because its population is small (Duttagupta and Pazarbasioglu, 2021: 5-7). However, from the point of view of media audiences in these countries, both elements of the epithet – “emerging” and “market” – are problematic and will be addressed in sequence in this section, starting with questions about emergence from what to what.

Business and management scholar Yusaf Akbar, at the Central European University in Vienna, who was founding editor of the *International Journal of Emerging Markets*, is now convinced that international business scholarship and teaching should consider abandoning the term “emerging markets” (Akbar, 2022: 3). Noting numerous critiques of the concept, including criticism of the practice whereby the terms emerging markets, developing countries and developing economies are used interchangeably and indiscriminately, Akbar goes on to draw on world systems theory to argue that those industries in countries of the Global South now closely coupled with global value chains of multinationals based in the Global North remain structurally dependent and peripheral in terms of technology and human development (Akbar, 2022: 7). As companies in the developed core of the world system move to “deglobalize” to shore up the post-pandemic resilience of their value chains, continuing use of the term emerging markets in policy and management practices risks reinforcing the “global dependency and inequality” of countries liable to experience negative effects of deglobalization (Akbar, 2022: 9).

Audiences are seen by some as part of global value chains. It might be argued that the expansion of global subscription-video-on-demand (SVOD) ventures like Netflix, Amazon, Starz Play and others into parts of Southwest Asia and North Africa since the mid-2010s, followed by Disney+ in 2022, counts as continuing globalization. Yet the trend, decided from the Global North and vulnerable to any budget cuts these major players might make in future, has serious implications for the viability of local media industries, with knock-on effects for the content available to local audiences and how it reaches them. Observers use different language to deconstruct these dynamics depending on who they are. International consultants Accenture refer to intensifying competition, the importance of “granular user data” and the evolution of business models to “accommodate a new class of consumer-creators and hybrid monetization opportunities”, all transforming the “traditional, linear value chain” into a “complex web of relationships” (Murdoch 2020). Meanwhile Nicholas Garnham’s jargon-free breakdown of relationships behind the dynamics highlights the processes assumed to be at work when markets operate without excessive distortions and monopolies. Pointing to constraints on “what is consumed by whom under what circumstances” when this is governed by “market relations”, he begins with content production costs as follows: “Within a commercial system symbols are only circulated in the quantities and forms for which sufficient people, including advertisers, will pay sufficient money to ensure the profitability of production” (Garnham, 2000: 115-116). He continues:

“Thus audiences or publics are first and foremost conceived by producers, measured by audience research and marketing departments as markets and in turn media products are tailored to the known desires and spending patterns of those markets” (Garnham, 2000: 116).

It is inherent assumptions about audience measurement being linked to advertising spend and other production funding that cause the concept of market relations to unravel when applied

to countries that are the focus here. Insofar as SVOD operators gain ground in the region it is partly a reflection of pockets of affluence but also audience dissatisfaction with content provided to date through what media owners and advertisers have been prepared to spend. Comparative figures are hard to come by but, taking spending on television advertisements in the Arab world as an indicator, this has remained dramatically lower than the equivalent in Europe or the US even while the kind of digital advertising that can be tracked for results has risen everywhere. Researchers at Northwestern University in Qatar (NU-Q), looking specifically at Arab countries, estimated that television advertising spend per head of population was US\$17 in “MENA” in 2016, compared with \$US43 in Latin America, US\$80 in Europe and US\$195 in North America (NU-Q, 2016: 64). The NU-Q report listed three reasons for the low “MENA” figure. One was the dominance of pan-Arab distribution, with content aimed across multiple Arabic-speaking countries instead of the core markets advertisers prefer. Another was “huge gaps” between the inflated amounts shown on rate cards and net spend after commissions and discounts. A further reason, dropped discreetly without elaboration in between the other two, was that “credible audience measurement systems are missing” (NU-Q, 2016: 62-63).

The reason why these systems are missing has been the elephant in the room for decades. Credible measurement remained elusive into the early 2020s when the introduction of people meters was finally arranged yet again, this time with Nielsen in Saudi Arabia, despite previous aborted attempts elsewhere, and just as streaming and online video were starting anyway to provide the kind of granular user data extolled by those who stand to benefit from audience measurement. As demonstrated by the delay in getting to that point, not everyone does stand to benefit, least of all the agency that monopolised Arab media market sales for more than 20 years or governments that are unconcerned about content being popular provided it suits their agenda. An article in the English-language trade press in 2018 noted the

political sensitivities surrounding any open discussion of the Middle East's "sole media sales powerhouse" and "behemoth", the Choueiri Group, both because of the "uncertain nature of the information involved" and because of the Saudi government's "determination to control all aspects of the media," manifest in its taking a controlling stake in MBC – a move outside observers saw risking a drop in viewership and reduction in advertising spend (Akerman, 2018).

Choueiri Group represented MBC until 2020 in a partnership built on personal links between the founders of both entities (Harb, 2015: 44). The mindset behind its long-lasting control over a reported 70 per cent of the regional advertising market (Sakr, 2009: 138) is evident in interview comments by the founder's son, Pierre Choueiri, who took over on the death of his father, Antoine, in 2010. Hinting that the primary purpose of audience figures was to keep clients happy, he told *Campaign* magazine in 2017 that his group only represented businesses that were already Number One or had the "potential to become Number One in their field" (Allison, 2017). "If you represent the best media, if you give them peace of mind that their campaign will succeed as per their requirements, why would they go elsewhere?", he asked, noting that any new media owner entering the market would be bound to start conversations with the Choueiri Group about representation within six months (Allison, 2017). Pierre Choueiri's resistance to people meters, blamed for the failure of the UAE's three-year experiment with them that started in 2012, was disguised behind a simultaneous and contradictory call for more transparency than he said other stakeholders were willing to tolerate and dismissal of people meters as useless in being unable to capture all viewing online and offline (Akerman, 2015). Choueiri's reference to mutual favours exchanged with clients in terms of occasionally selling "something that is not sellable" or placing advertisements with underperforming media is telling (Akerman, 2012). Favours from Choueiri executives to "help out" smaller agencies are also mentioned (Harb, 2015: 45).

Meanwhile, senior people in advertising report feeling under pressure to do their clients' bidding and unable to give truthful advice (Drumwright and Kamal, 2016: 191-192). In an unusual study of advertising industry ethics in what its authors call the "emerging markets of MENA", two researchers, one of them a Saudi national, interviewed 36 practitioners and three executives with international advertising or consumer associations (Drumwright and Kamal, 2016: 173; 180). The identities of these informants were themselves indicative of issues affecting practice in the field, in that only five were indigenous to the countries in which they were working and the remainder were either from outside the Arab world altogether or were nationals of a country other than the one they worked in. Pointing out that poor pay scales relative to other jobs fail to attract indigenous talent to the advertising industry in rich countries in the region, the researchers noted that "expatriates often perceive they have little stake in their agency's or their clients' business" (Drumwright and Kamal, 2016: 180; 189). Their informants reported many instances of "fraud, false claims, copyright and trademark violations, privacy infringements, and irresponsible and socially undesirable advertising" that either had "little protection in the law or laws are not enforced" – issues the practitioners believed left consumers mostly unperturbed and remained undetected by international judges brought in for local award shows (Drumwright and Kamal, 2016: 182; 184).

It seems logical that the rise of digital media, especially digital video, should gradually lay the issue of false claims about audience measurement to rest, helped by the emergence of entrepreneurial agencies run by a younger generation. This in turn could align with further expansion of content production budgets by subscription-based VOD operators, both global and regional, such as Icflix and MBC's Shahid, which has both advertisement-free as well as advertising-funded options. For local audiences, however, production spending by global SVOD companies, albeit driven by greater competition, may not be a panacea. First there is

the cost of subscription, not to mention the availability of high-speed broadband, which explains why the proportion of people found to use streaming services such as Netflix and Shahid was twice as high in 2019 in Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE as in Tunisia, Egypt and Jordan (Sakr, 2023b: 125). Then there is the still-open question of how far new production budgets, such as those invested by Netflix in companies based in Lebanon, Jordan and Egypt (Sakr 2023b: 127-128) and Saudi Arabia (Sakr 2023a: 41) help to embed locally secure expertise and locally relevant content. Disney+ made its entry to the region with the series *Moon Knight*, based on the Marvel Comics superhero of the same name, and employed Egyptians for direction, music production, acting, film editing and costume and interior design. Yet the Egyptian director, Mohamed Diab, who earned international acclaim for his films *678* (2010) and *Eshtebak* (Clash, 2016), had faced a coordinated smear campaign inside Egypt because of *Eshtebak*'s portrayal of the Muslim Brotherhood, as a result of which he and his writer-producer wife, Sarah Goher, relocated to Michigan in the US and turned their focus to the US market (Ritman 2021). *Moon Knight* was also not shot in Egypt, but in Budapest, allegedly because of difficulties in obtaining Egyptian permits, thereby injecting large sums into the Hungarian economy that could have benefited Egypt (Ayyad 2022).

Public opinion research and surveys

Constraints on research into social and political issues in autocracies, like constraints on media reporting, are multi-layered. Evidence of extreme risk was seen in 2016 when Giulio Regeni was abducted, tortured and murdered while researching labour unions in Egypt for his doctorate at the University of Cambridge. Matthew Hedges, a Durham University doctoral student of politics, was sentenced to life imprisonment in Abu Dhabi in 2018 on spying charges and held for six months before being released. Yet exposure of the constraints remains muted even in academic literature. While examining reasons why “MENA” universities rank so low internationally, Nick Forster (2018: 1029) reveals a partial

explanation for the silence, in the form of academic contract clauses forbidding publication of any material “critical” of the country, its rulers, its governance or the academic policies and procedures of the university. The publisher’s blurb for Ratiba Hadj-Moussa’s collection on “difficult places and sensitive subjects” (Hadj-Moussa 2020), which deals primarily with Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco, also hints at an explanation, in suggesting that issues of difficulty and sensitivity are conceived not only as police repression but also as theoretical or empirical *impensé* (literally: unthought).

To research audiences in this environment is to run into problems with interpreting terms like “public” and “public opinion”. These problems are more basic than Livingstone’s (2005: 17; 28) resistance to allowing the increased mediation of publics and increased participation of audiences to result in a “collapsing” of publics into audiences or vice versa, or Splichal’s point (2012: 30-32) that three centuries of debates largely initiated by the Enlightenment have thrown up contradictions and different theoretical paradigms such that “universal definitions of the public and public opinion cannot be attained.” Instead they have to do with normative conceptions of publics as “active, critically engaged and politically significant” (Livingstone 2005: 17) and a “conceptual connection between “opinion polling and participatory politics” (Gengler et al 2021: 118) that overlooks the concerns of people in non-democratic settings where survey research, often politically associated with “the Western world”, may be used for “purposes of political surveillance and manipulation rather than political participation” (Gengler et al 2021: 119).

Quantitative reports about opinions held in Arab countries and Iran have nevertheless become commonplace, including opinions about media and aspects of governance that determine how audiences are valued and treated. This chapter has already mentioned the *MENA Media Use Survey* that Northwestern University in Qatar (NU-Q) conducted from 2013 to 2019.

Although the region has a small handful of local social survey research centres, such as those

in Amman and Ramallah, focusing on their local societies, most of the multi-country research with the potential to make international headlines is run by bodies based outside the region. NU-Q worked with The Harris Poll, active in the US since 1956 with offices in four US cities and London. The Arab Barometer, which says on its website that it has surveyed the “attitudes, values, judgments, and preferences of ordinary citizens” including their “media habits and consumption” in 15 Arab countries since 2006, is based in Princeton.

The Arab Opinion Index, launched in 2011 and compiled a total of eight times by 2022, is conducted from a centre in Doha, Qatar, but published by the Arab Centre in Washington. Other projects and entities have also extended their activities to selected Arab countries since the 9/11 atrocities in 2001 and US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 prompted policy makers and others in North America and Europe to try to plug some very glaring knowledge gaps. Examples include the Vienna-based World Values Survey (WVS), Washington-based Pew Research Centre, and Gallup, which has two of its 20 regional centres in the “Middle East and Africa”, both of them in the Gulf. Vox Nation, located in Canada, offers opinion polling in Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan. The Arab Youth Survey, which entered its fourteenth year in 2022, is published in the name of a Dubai subsidiary of the global communication agency BCW, itself part of the multinational public relations and advertising holding company, WPP, headquartered in the UK. Social media use became an added interest after the uprisings that spread from Tunisia in 2010 to other countries, to the point where the volume of reporting on attitudes in the region is such that the multitude of problems liable to undermine its credibility tends to recede from view.

These problems begin with data quality and the representativeness of samples used, as demonstrated in respect of certain Barometer and WVS series by Pellicer and Wegner (2018: 189). A spat between two American pollsters conducted through the blog pages of *The Washington Post* in October and November 2017 also illuminates how much self-proclaimed

experts on gauging opinion in Arab countries distrust each other's work. On one side Justin Gengler, employed by Qatar University, cited doubts about sponsorship, sample selection and lack of transparency about methods in various named surveys to argue that "one cannot know to what extent sample distortions" produce "distorted" conclusions (Gengler 2017). On the other, David Pollock, whose biography says he "provided policy advice on issues of democracy and reform" in the "Middle East" at the US State Department from 2002 (i.e. before and during the ill-judged invasion of Iraq), noted that high refusal rates for telephone interviews cannot be "adequately corrected for by any statistical technique" and also urged greater attention to the wording and sequencing of questions, minimum sample sizes and a move away from claiming that results for a few Arab societies can speak for the whole region (Pollock 2017). In a fairly stinging separate critique of another US-based pollster and academic, Shibley Telhami, Pollock had previously drawn attention to potential distortions caused by "host government supervision, permission, or intimidation", neglect of opinions outside urban centres and the use of loaded questions (Pollock 2013).

A similar litany of constraints was presented by two scholars from the University of Aberdeen in the UK to the American Political Science Association in 2017, with additional reference to risks to field researchers in conflict zones as well as problems of training and supervising data collectors in the field, translating questionnaires "into Arabic" and a high proportion of missing answers (Abbott and Teti, 2017). It might be argued, given the extent and nature of the acknowledged shortcomings, that polls should be taken with what Pollock (2013) called a "proverbial shaker of salt". If, as in Pollock's view (2013), "no single source" of Arab polling can be "credible" and the "discrepancies among different pollsters are so significant", this implies long-standing wholesale misrepresentation of the views of members of audiences and publics. Gengler and Mitchell have subsequently also shown (2018: 120) that even where individuals generally share overarching norms, values, traditions, heritage

and historical experiences, as is the case for example among the culturally cohesive population of Qatari nationals, this does not preclude those individuals using divergent social, political or economic reference points when evaluating specific questions or concepts.

As noted, polling specialists recognise a “kind of mistrust or suspicion” about “possible misuses of surveys” (Gengler et al, 2021: 118-119). Compounding this is the insertion of concepts that have currency in North America and Europe into questionnaires that are designed in English before being translated, as in the case discussed by Abbott and Teti (2017), into Arabic. Hence, for example, the Arab Opinion Index 2022 contained the question “Which of the following statements is closest to your view on the Arab Spring?” Yet the term Arab Spring was introduced by commentators outside the countries where protests took place and is not aligned with views on the uprisings and their aftermath held by people living there (eg Avery 2021). The Arab Barometer asked respondents to identify themselves as “religious”, “somewhat religious” or “not-religious” – a set of categories that makes questionable sense in societies where religious values and practice are woven into ordinary people’s everyday lives.

Conclusion

It is hard to avoid the impression that opinion polling, like other analytical approaches to audiences in Southwest Asia and North Africa, adopts concepts about human societies that have been produced elsewhere and universalised. Insofar as the phrase “public opinion research” puts a positive spin on what could be negatively construed as unscientific and possibly inaccurate generalisations, it would seem to classify as an example of displacement (Thompson 1990: 62). The same applies to the concept of media accountability, whereby non-state actors are presumed to promote media responsibility towards the public but which, in certain settings, can simply point to instruments that function as another mechanism of

authoritarian control. Calls to abandon the term “emerging markets”, routinely applied by businesses and researchers to countries in the so-called MENA region, have highlighted the global relations of dependency and inequality the term hides. Even basic notions of media market relations prove problematic when they assume a link between audience numbers and advertising spend, which does not exist when powerful forces block credible measurement. Evidence shows that reports of production geared to local audiences may gloss over the actual distance between creatives and shooting locations on one hand and local operations on the other. Meanwhile the realities of audience agency are contested because the communicative agency and creativity of ordinary people is limited but also stimulated by repression.

Audiences are construed by many different interest groups, including but not limited to: scholars, commercial agencies and social media platforms involved in advertising placement and content production and distribution; opinion pollsters; governments and state media operators. The finding of this chapter is that, with the exception of some ethically minded scholars who are not bound by employment terms local to the region, the interest groups who research audiences in Arab countries and Iran tend to be pushed by political expediency in these autocratic settings to put their own interests ahead of those of the people they are researching. Close examination of that process reveals that narratives about audiences are presented in universalised language that serves to mask a lack of credible knowledge because the language itself is familiar to those consulting the narratives. To normalise a persistent lack of insightful information is to be complicit in maintaining relations of domination inherent in the status quo.

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