Marwan Kraidy’s *Reality Television and Arab Politics: Contention in Public Life* (2009) offers one of the most vividly compelling accounts of the intersections of politics and popular culture within Arab societies in the first decade of this century. Kraidy’s analysis of those intersections provides an indispensable introduction to the ongoing sociopolitical turmoil in Arab countries, foreshadowing and explaining the current tumultuous events of the “Arab Spring.” Reviewing this book serves the important purpose of illuminating the intricacies of global communication trends—in particular, how new mediated cultural forms like reality TV may trigger deep questions about cultural identity and modernity (in the guise of public controversies). The book’s central goal is to provide a grounded understanding of how and why Arab reality TV has become a source of “contention” and of bitter political and social disputes in the region. To achieve this goal, the author delivers a cogent analysis of several national cases in which Arab reality TV engendered controversy.

The book’s expansive introduction lays out in full the book’s rationale and its main arguments. The introduction usefully maps out how the book is organized and guides readers, who may be unfamiliar with the topic or with Arab cultural and media studies, into an understanding of why this intellectual endeavour matters. The author persuasively argues that the political debates that Arab reality TV shows have ignited are largely rooted in Arab societies’ bitter struggle with modernity. The debates are fundamentally related to how different segments of society fight to protect the perceived “authenticity” (p. 56) of Arab culture from the onslaught of “foreign” (p. 12)—code word for sexually permissive and immoral—influence. Kraidy further submits that a ferocious struggle over defining “reality” (p. 18) lies at the heart of these cultural tensions, having all the elements of a social laboratory with antagonistic forces vying for supremacy. He sums up his main thesis thusly:

> The combined cultural, social and political impact of reality TV—the ultimate reason for the controversies—is best understood as follows: reality TV is a social laboratory where various versions of modernity are elaborated and contested, a courtroom of sorts that hosts modernity’s endless trial. During the trial, various ways of being modern emerge, all involving a combination of media and other institutions playing a central role in mediating modernity, a refashioning of individual identities and their relationship to society, and a search for historically resonant and culturally meaningful forms of modernity. (p. 18)

These actors use the phenomenon of reality TV as a proxy to stanch the decline precipitated by a “presumptive modern polluting the nonmodern” (p. 16). The new gender dynamics promoted in reality TV shows, embodied by the mingling of the sexes, have augured a disturbing threat to these conservative segments.

In this proxy struggle, a contentious politics takes popular culture hostage, and the book’s seven chapters illustrate how this battle took shape throughout the Arab
reality TV controversies. The first chapter, “Screens of Contention: The Battle for Arab Viewers,” delves into the audience dynamics that make reality TV a viable business in the Arab broadcasting industries. The Arab media landscape has witnessed a fundamental transformation ushered in by satellite television channels such as Al Jazeera Television. Arab reality TV programming has capitalized on media audiences’ increasing familiarity with a media environment in which the private and the public blend. The nature of this chapter’s background material could well have been integrated in the book’s introduction.

The first actual case study of Arab reality TV show controversies comes, however, in chapter 2, “Voting Islam off the Island: Big Brother in Bahrain.” Shot on a Bahraini island, the first episode of al-Ra’is, the Arabic version of Big Brother, was broadcast in 2004. The show was immediately suspended after it generated an unprecedented uproar following an episode that revealed a female contestant’s scarf falling and a Saudi male contestant kissing another female contestant. As protesters took to Bahrain’s streets, religious conservatives and economic liberals bitterly argued about the show in parliament. Kraidy makes the case that this debate about Big Brother revealed the deep chasm between two competing visions about social values and business interests. On the one hand, religious conservatives worried about the debilitating influence of the “foreign” (p. 12) and how the show tarnished Bahrain’s “national reputation” (p. 57). On the other hand, economic liberals worried about the international message that clamping down on the show would send, and maintained that Bahrain would not attract foreign investments and capital. The chapter offers an excellent diagnosis of how reality TV has convulsed Arab reality.

Kraidy further roots these controversies in the political economy of Arab entertainment media, particularly what he labels “The Saudi-Lebanese Connection” (p. 64)—an alliance of Saudi capital and Lebanese talent—and how it has become responsible for sponsoring and spawning different forms of mediated entertainment. Chapter 3 expounds on this alliance, highlighting the economic and political-entertainment nexus involved in Arab reality TV shows. Funding this type of entertainment media, and employing the Lebanese know-how have long enabled the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to circumvent the political pressures mounted by domestic conservative voices. Economically, Arab entertainment media’s viable business model actually lies in the lucrative Saudi advertising market. Politically, Saudis use this entertainment media complex to practise “reform from the outside” (p. 88), reaching the Saudi public from Lebanese screens without alienating domestic opposition, while also wielding regional influence in Lebanon and elsewhere. The chapter’s analysis of the historical roots and strategic implications of this alliance on Arab culture is well-rounded and insightful.

The Saudi-Lebanese Connection does not totally quell dissenting domestic voices that feel threatened by the onslaught of reality TV, as chapters 4 and 5 illustrate. In fact, reality TV shows revived the modernity wars and dormant tensions in Saudi society. Using terms such as “Satan Academy” (p. 114) and “moral terrorism” (p. 101), Saudi religious conservatives attacked Star Academy, a hugely popular reality TV show, for corrupting Saudi’s identity and authenticity as ensconced in the country’s practice
of Islam. Despite religious conservatives’ strong denunciations, the broad Saudi audience evinced palpable ambivalence toward this traditionalist discourse, as demonstrated by Star Academy’s persistent popularity. Echoing the same concerns about identity and modernity, Kuwaiti Islamists attacked Star Academy only to be silenced by the surging popular interest in the show (see chapter 5). These two chapters provide ample evidence about the bitter fight emerging from these antagonistic forces’ grappling with the modernity.

The crystallization of nationalistic sentiments and pride in the reality TV controversies is the subject of chapters six and seven. The Lebanese-Syrian difficult relations, particularly Syria’s long dominance of Lebanese politics, became tense fodder in the Arab reality TV show Superstar, the Arabic version of American Idol, as contestants faced the prospect of elimination through audience votes. As news media reported on Syria’s suspect role in the assassination of Rafiq Al Hariri (former Lebanese prime minister), Syrian-Lebanese relations (which had reached a boiling point) and Syria’s hegemony became part of the drama surrounding the Superstar contest aired on a Lebanese television station in 2006. The contest involved a 17-year old Syrian woman who competed against a Saudi man for the title of the “Superstar of the Arabs” (p. 148). Kraidy shows how the female contestant became a rallying and nationalist symbol for Syrian audiences. Further, as chapter seven discusses, Lebanon’s “Independence Intifada” mimicked the ethos of reality TV (e.g., voting) and constituted a “hypermedia event” (p. 187). The author is careful to distinguish these “hypermedia events” (p. 187) from “pseudo events” (p. 186) since the former refers to the people’s harnessing of technological convergence and a media saturated lexicon to highlight genuine grievances. In other terms, this “hyper media space” (p. 188) enables a new contentious politics in Arab societies, which is totally distinct from the “pseudo events” constructed by consultants to distract people’s attention from reality (p. 186). The richness and strength of the “hypermedia event” as a powerful concept could have used more grounded theorization and elaboration.

Kraidy’s Reality Television and Arab Politics: Contention in Public Life demonstrates that “entertainment is political” and that popular culture is deeply enmeshed in cultural and political controversies. In this regard, readers and communication scholars will find the book very useful. I find that the book’s significant achievements include its allusion to the rise of “neo-authoritarianism” (p. 200) in the Arab world, as regimes wield the potentially liberating aspects of new communication technologies to clamp down on dissent. In reading the book, one cannot escape the thought that these popular culture controversies and their accompanying ethos in some way became an effective and alternative means of voicing deep-seated anger at Arab authoritarianism. Still, the book could have elaborated on how reality TV shows’ emphasis on audience voting and arguing foster democratic habits and behaviours. While Kraidy’s scrupulous analysis may have prevented him from drawing any strong conclusions about the liberating potential of popular culture, I believe that the book would have benefited from a more elaborate and rigorous examination of how reality TV may be furthering democracy’s essence mainly: “arguing, bargaining, and voting” (p. 198).

The book sometimes reads like a journalistic account that leaves much room for empirically-grounded research and analysis. Therefore, some audience research, par-
particularly interviews and focus groups of Arab reality TV audiences, could have filled some of these gaps and may have provided potential areas of development. For those unfamiliar with Arab culture and history, the book’s cogent accounts dispel persistent myths in the West, such as the unquestioning use of the so-called Arab Street to imply that Arab societies have a supposedly homogenous nature and irrational populace. Overall, the book is enjoyable and indispensable reading to anyone who is interested in global communication research. Perusing the book in the climate of the “Arab Spring,” which has overthrown many authoritarian Arab regimes, leaves readers with an unmistakable impression about this book’s prescient and perceptive analysis of the deep convulsions in Arab public life.

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