

The Revolutionary Public Sphere: The Case of the Arab Uprisings

Marwan M. Kraidy & Marina R. Krikorian

The popular rebellions that swept Arab countries starting with Tunisia in December 2010, then moving on to Bahrain, Egypt, Syria and Yemen, spawned an active sphere of dissenting cultural production. Though media harnessed by revolutionaries include public space, graffiti, street art, puppet shows, poetry, songs, cartoons, digital art and music videos, many analyses have focused on social media as digital platforms. Social media and mobile telephones introduced a new element to political activism, but the focus on technology provides a partial understanding of activist communication. A more comprehensive picture of dissent in the Arab uprisings requires us to understand how revolutionaries have represented themselves, their demands, and their opponents, and how various media, digital and otherwise, were incorporated in these communicative processes. In other words, we need to focus on the myths, ideologies, and histories that inspired slogans, murals and poems and made them socially relevant and politically potent; of the creative permutations of symbols, words, images, colors, shapes and sounds that revolutionaries deployed to contest despots, outwit each other, attract attention, and conjure up new social and political imaginaries.

Together, the papers in this special issue of *Communication and the Public* accomplish just this task. Originally presented at the inaugural biennial symposium of what was then the Project for Advanced Research in Global Communication in 2013, the articles you are about to read exemplify one of the fundamental principles undergirding the institutional mission of the Center for Advanced Research in Global Communication

at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania: a robust dialogue between theoretical advances on the one hand, and deep linguistic, cultural, historical knowledge of the world region under study, on the other. Pitting “area studies” and “disciplines” in overlapping hermeneutic cycles promises to deliver a truly translocal approach to global media, culture and politics that does not sacrifice local nuance for theoretical abstraction, or undermine conceptual construction by getting bogged down in contextual minutiae (Kraidy and Murphy, 2008).¹ Communication, as Clifford Geertz wrote of anthropology, “is an undisciplined discipline,” so it stands to benefit enormously from both the empirical grounding in primary sources that these articles perform, and from contributions from scholars hailing from various fields (sociology, drama and performance studies, media and communication, Middle East and Islamic studies, etc.). Together they probe fascinating episodes of contention, culture and communication in the Arab uprisings, and while doing so enables a reconsideration of the notion of the public sphere in light of revolutionary upheaval.

The Public Sphere in Revolutionary Times

Theories of the public sphere have usually not been concerned with revolutionary times. They have rather reflected an ethos of gentlemanly deliberation, a normative ideal rather than actual practice even in the most enlightened and stable polities. Privileging rational communication has compelled a focus on speech—rendered as conversation, deliberation, or dialogue—over less scripted and institutionalized modes of communication grounded in a more complex view of humans as embodied subjects whose public exchanges display interactions between reason, emotion and performance.

This volume shows that a comprehensive understanding of the public sphere must integrate the contentious, the affective, and the performative, alongside the rational-deliberative.

Habermas' *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (2001), the canonical treatise on the question, focuses on European white, male, bourgeois deliberation against an assumed backdrop of peace and social order (Calhoun, 1992).ⁱⁱ Habermas initially emphasized the independence, even antagonism between the public and the state: "bourgeois public sphere ... above all as the sphere of private people come together as a public ... against the public authorities themselves ... The medium of this political confrontation was ... people's public use of their reason" (2001, p, 27). This definition foregrounds the independence of the public sphere from the state and the centrality of rationality in public deliberation. "The public sphere," Habermas subsequently wrote, "can best be described as a network for communication, information, and points of view ... the public sphere is reproduced through communicative action, for which mastery of a natural language suffices" (1996, p. 30). Here communication and a shared language emerge as fundamental elements of the public sphere. Bourgeois individuals coalescing as a public through the public deployment of rational, verbal communication are the key ingredient of the Habermasian public sphere. In Nancy Fraser's words, it is "a theater in modern societies in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk" (1992, p. 110).

The notion of the public sphere entered debates about Arab media in the wake of the emergence of Al-Jazeera in 1996, Al-Qaeda's attack on the United States in September 2001, and the ensuing scramble for Arab public opinion. Lynch (2006) argued

that Al-Jazeera has created a genuine public sphere around the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. Nonetheless, that Arab public sphere was not liberal because it is grounded in discourses of Arab authenticity and identity, neither does it provide a “mechanism for translating its ideas into outcomes” (p. 5). Rather, “this transnational public sphere encouraged a politics of identity and of resistance at odds with the normative expectations of the advocates of cosmopolitan democracy” (p. 52). Lynch concluded that “The new Arab public sphere is a genuine public sphere, characterized by self-conscious, open, and contentious political argument before a vast but discrete audience. Al-Jazeera’s call-in shows were particularly distinctive in that regard...” but that it is a “weak public ... cut off from any viable means of directly influencing policy outcomes ... The emphasis on identity—and particularly on a narrative of collective suffering and disenfranchisement—runs counter to liberal presuppositions,” and that “the new Arab public is open to argument and committed to public debate” (pp. 247-251). In hindsight, this strikes me as offering parallels to the kind of fragmented public sphere of postwar Lebanon (after 1990), when a proliferation of talk-shows on privately-owned, “pirate” television channels, echoed interactions between erstwhile militia-dominated enclaves on the ground, while at the same time offering a somehow “neutral” space where previously warring and now simply antagonistic factions could communicate (Kraidy, 2000).

Habermas haunts the study of Arab politics beyond Arab media studies.ⁱⁱⁱ In her introduction to one of the first volumes dedicated to the topic, Shami (1999) wrote that “[T]he concept of public spheres thus promises to elucidate the diversity of civil society, of resistance practices and democratization processes” (p. 36). “[Publics] are created through processes of inclusion but also of exclusion ... Hegemonic publics are often

unmarked” (p. 33). Other contributors to that volume provide interesting insights in critically reevaluating claims about the European bourgeois public sphere, in arguing that the public sphere is not independent from the state but should rather be understood as “an arena of political struggle between the ruler and the ruled” (Shami, 1999, p. 21).^{iv} Notably, Campos (1999) examines the budding revolutionary public sphere of the Young Turks revolution of 1908, which shows uncanny resemblance to the contemporary Arab public sphere in its national and regional overlaps.^v

In her work on the performance of citizenship and personhood in Yemen, Wedeen (2008) extends criticism of Habermas’s location of the source of the public sphere in the bourgeois family unit, and allows that “vibrant communities of argument” still emerged in Yemen despite the absence of institutional structures and protections evident in the European public sphere that inspired Habermas. Nonetheless, Wedeen still espouses a deliberative notion of the public sphere as embodied in the Qat chew: “the deliberation so evident in these meetings represents an important aspect of democratic practice and personhood. These discussions are part of what it means to act democratically—to entertain lively disagreements about issues of mutual public concern, and to make worlds in common” (p. 104). Even as Yemen presents a weak central state, a heavily armed citizenry, and an imperfectly representative government, conditions there differ sharply from revolutionary conditions.

Though the literature on contentious politics and social movements has had relatively little to say about communicative and associated cultural processes in collective action,^{vi} and though media and communication are absent, or at best epiphenomenal, in notable books about MENA social movements and collective action,^{vii} the Middle East

has inspired important works on media and culture in the Egyptian revolution of 1919, the Iranian Revolution of 1979, and more recent developments in the last decade. Fahmy's (2011) work on the 1919 Revolution in Egypt puts media and performance at the heart of revolutionary practice. Sreberny and Mohammadi's (1994) work on the Iranian Revolution of 1979 also focuses on media. These are important contributions, but they refer to historically distant events, and their single-country focuses ignores the transnational circulation of media and culture emblematic of the Arab spring. Kraidy's work (2010) on the pan-Arab reality television controversies elaborates a contentious-performative vision of the transnational Arab public sphere, and Lina Khatib (2013) casts a regional-transnational look at the role of visuals in political communication in the Middle East, but these two works are not explicitly focused on revolution nor are they primarily interested in theories of the public sphere.

Building on the literature mentioned previously, this special issue reconsiders the public sphere in the Arab world at a time of revolution. In one of the most influential critiques, Nancy Fraser wrote that though "Habermas's idea of the public sphere is indispensable to critical social theory and democratic political practice ... the specific form in which Habermas has elaborated his theory is not wholly satisfactory ... [and] needs to undergo some critical interrogation and reconstruction if it is to yield a category capable of theorizing the limits of actually existing democracy" (1992, p. 111). Two lines of critique are important for the purposes of this volume. First is the historical (and geographic) specificity of Habermas' theory and its failure to include "other, nonliberal, nonbourgeois, competing public spheres" (p. 115). Second is the "assumption ... that a proliferation of a multiplicity of competing publics is necessarily a step away from, rather

than toward, greater democracy, and that a single, comprehensive public sphere is always preferable to a nexus of multiple publics” (p. 117). A third premise running through Habermas’ theory is that rational deliberation through speech is the privileged, even exclusive, mode of communication in the public sphere. While, in all fairness, Habermas has been diligent in addressing his critics’ concerns and reformulating his theories (Habermas, 2011),^{viii} unequivocally stating that his was “a eurocentrically limited view” (Anderson and Dews, 1985, p. 104), his basic premises seem incommensurable with a revolutionary situation.

Though many studies have offered important amendments or correctives to the bourgeois public sphere, Habermas’ rational deliberative view remained an overall normative model for scholarship on the Arab public sphere. As Zayani pointed out, the “appropriation of the notion of the public sphere is problematic in a number of ways” (2008, p. 70). One is the need to indigenize the notion, to recontextualize it in the Arab world. Second is the tendency to conflate “Arab” and “Muslim” public spheres. Third is the transformation of the role of the elite, the argument being that the new Arab public sphere has pushed the old political elite and prioritized a new “cultural” elite. What is more, Shami expressed a warranted ambivalence towards Western understandings of the public sphere that are anchored by a fundamental assumption of socio-political stability, and suggested that “[I]t might be that fragility is rather an essential quality of the public sphere itself—and that public civility needs to be continually and vigilantly constructed, buttressed and protected” (1999, p. 38).

Though contributors do not engage directly or systematically with the notion of the public sphere, the articles herein leave no doubt that the Arab uprisings are a

particularly auspicious opportunity to reconsider critiques of Habermas in a revolutionary context, along axes raised by critics of rational-deliberative public sphere: its locational provincialism, its elitist underpinnings, its exclusive thrust, its assumption of stability, its focus on linguistic deliberation, etc. The Arab uprisings clearly fall outside of the purview of Habermasian conceptions of the public sphere, historically, geographically, and most important, substantively. None of the Arab spring countries have a single, unified public sphere. Rather, they reflect permutations of overlapping public spheres—transnational, national and subnational. Egypt for example, has strong national media, and therefore, one presumes a national public sphere. Nonetheless, the Egyptian public sphere overlaps with the pan-Arab sphere, and the revolution spawned active sub-national public spheres, affiliated with various political and social actors, and translocal connections to groups and movements in other Arab countries. Clearly, revolutionary Egypt had multiple publics, at once distinct and overlapping, variations of religious and secular, urban and rural, bourgeois and popular. When she coined the term *subaltern counterpublics* to describe the alternative public spheres of historically subordinated groups in stratified societies, Fraser (1992) argued that such counterpublics invent new languages to overcome the disadvantages they suffer in the official public sphere. Fraser is clear that:

Subaltern counterpublics are [not] always virtuous. Some ... are explicitly anti-democratic and antiegalitarian, and even those with democratic and egalitarian intentions are not always above practicing their own modes of informal exclusion and marginalization. Still, insofar as these counterpublics emerge in response to exclusions within dominant publics, they help expand discursive space. In

principle, assumptions that were previously exempt from contestation will now have to be publicly argued out. In general, the proliferation of subaltern counterpublics means a widening of discursive contestation, and that is a good thing in stratified societies (p. 124).

Fraser also criticizes Habermas' assumption that public sphere emerges when civil society and the state are separate. This is where she coins the difference between "strong public" and "weak public." Habermas' bourgeois public sphere, according to Fraser, "promotes ... weak publics, publics whose deliberative practice consists exclusively in opinion formation and does not also encompass decision making." She looks at the emergence of parliamentary sovereignty as a sign of the emergence of "*strong publics* ... sovereign parliaments ... publics whose discourse encompasses both opinion formation and decision making (p. 134)."

In addition to these macro-critiques, the Habermasian public sphere neglects emotional and affective elements of public communication, and its privileging of verbal and textual communication in theories of the public sphere has resulted in hostility towards images. The tension between words and images in Western theories of the public go as far back as Plato, but it is with the rise of modern media that the issue became a pressing intellectual concern. In *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* W. J. T. Mitchell (1987) writes that any theory of the image must confront iconoclasm because of the anxiety that images produce. Iconoclasm, the desire to control images, is central to influential theories of the modern public sphere, and stems from the ability of images to unsettle boundaries between reality and illusion (see Finnegan & Kang, 2004). "[V]ision is a spectator, hearing a participator," Dewey (2012) famously wrote in *The Public and*

its Problems, lamenting the proliferation of mediated images at the expense of local conversation. Iconoclasm, the desire to control images, is central to influential theories of the modern public sphere, and stems from the ability of images to unsettle boundaries between reality and illusion, an ability, that as contributors to this special issue demonstrate, is vital for revolutionary communication.

Making Revolutionary Publics

The social and political life of the revolutionary public sphere of the Arab uprisings is an auspicious opportunity to integrate the performative, affective, and visual aspects of the public sphere in a time of revolution. The focus on *dialogue* needs to take into account dynamics of *circulation*, and the centrality of *deliberation* needs to be tampered with the vitality of *contention*. The circulation of contentious discourse shapes an economy of *attention* and contributes to the *visibility* of various publics. Warner (2005) wrote that since in modern societies public discourse “puts a premium on accessibility ... differential deployment of style is essential” to the making of publics (pp. 76-77). If visibility connects the domains of aesthetics and politics (Brighenti, 2007), then the critical study of revolutionary communication elucidates how relations of perception affect relations of power in countries undergoing political redefinition.

Collectively, the articles in this issue convey a clear sense that, in an era of media saturation and attention scarcity in Arab public discourse, revolutionary communication teems with stylistic devices that make rival social identities and political ideologies visible. It is in this spirit that several articles in this issue can be said to be focused on revolutionary texts, whether satire (Owen Jones), graffiti (Alviso-Marino), television

drama (Skovgaard-Petersen), theatre (Ziter), and dance (Tayeb). As Michael Warner (2002) argued in “Publics and Counterpublics,” “the idea of a public, unlike a concrete audience or the public of any polity, is text-based—even though publics are increasingly organized around visual and audio texts. Without the idea of texts that can be picked up at different times and in different places by otherwise unrelated people, we would not imagine a public as an entity that embraces all the users of that text, whoever they might be” (p. 51). This special issue, then, vindicates Warner’s redefinition of the public sphere as a space of textual circulation, though it does not share Warner’s and Habermas’ implicit assumption of a relatively stable social and political system.

Warner and other works that reimagine the public sphere as a space of contentious, performative bodies usually do not account for protracted, violent, and radical political upheaval. Generally, theories discussed in the preceding texts say little about the patterns of explosion of revolutionary communication accompanied by often systematic and always brutal state repression, in a context polarized by intense rivalries between disparate revolutionary actors whose agendas are both antagonistic and overlapping. Though the substantive body of work on contestation during the French Revolution provides a rich, historical toolkit, it is not explicitly concerned with the public sphere.^{ix} The revolutionary public sphere is therefore under-researched and under-theorized, and the articles in this special issue begin to remedy that situation.

Ultimately, this special issue grapples with the answer to the question “How are revolutionary publics constituted?” One answer crafted collectively by the articles to follow is: “by creating and disseminating compelling revolutionary texts around which and against which various publics coalesce.” In other words, making revolutionary

publics requires *revolutionary creative labor* (Kraidy, 2016a). This entails what Jaspers (1997), comparing activists to artists, called “artfulness.” The key product of revolutionary creative labor, however, are not revolutionary texts or cultural forms, but rather, the subjectivity of the revolutionaries, echoing Jasper’s argument that artists can “generate and regenerate the very subjectivity they pretend only to display” (1997, p. 154). Revolutionary creative labor also echoes Lazzarato’s well-known theory of immaterial labor, which he sees as leading to “an enlargement of productive cooperation that even includes the production and reproduction of communication and hence its most important content: subjectivity” (1996, p. 139). There is one *major* difference, though: revolutionary creative labor, the ensemble of which may be understood as “creative insurgency,” is embodied rather than immaterial (Kraidy, 2016b). Contributors to our special issue show how various activist groups created media that reflected physical suffering, conjured up a better biopolitics, or even acted therapeutically on the abused bodies of people in times of revolution.

The Revolutionary Public Sphere, then, provides a unique vista on culture, communication and contention in the Arab uprisings, and fills gaps in the literature on the public sphere. By exploring processes of stylistic innovation, aesthetic experimentation, and mediated dissent in the Arab uprisings, it posits revolutionary publics on a spectrum between Fraser’s weak and strong publics. Unlike weak publics, revolutionary publics go beyond dialogue and deliberation to express aspirations, make demands, and extract rhetorical concessions before toppling autocrats. Unlike strong publics, however, revolutionary publics are not yet sovereign parliaments and do not work through institutional structures. They are ambitious and aspirational. Revolutionary collectives are

liminal publics, stuck in a subjunctive present between a rejected past and a desired future. To paraphrase Matthew Arnold, revolutionary publics are stuck between a world that is dead and another world that is struggling to be born. Contributions to this special issue captures this liminal struggle, its manifold expressions, its fits and starts, its colors and sounds, its accomplishment and setbacks.

The Contributions

Anahi Alviso-Marino focuses on intersections of space, contentious politics, and artistic practices, examining how visual expressions located in the streets reflect a vivid political public sphere, understood as a site of critical debate and interaction. Using the case study of Murad Subay, a painter from Yemen's capital Sana'a who initiated a series of street art campaigns in 2012, she questions the conditions that allowed street art to encourage political engagement, mobilize people and provoke instances of collective action in Yemen. Critiquing Western media's characterization of Subay as the "Yemeni Banksy," Alivso-Marino connects Subay's campaigns to other expressions of street politics in Yemen and explores street art as a device to express issues that became worthy of collective action in the period following the ousting of former president Saleh.

Marc Owen Jones shows how social media has permitted activists to subvert censorship and state controlled media. As a result, it has become a key medium for experimenting with and/or creating genres previously marginalized or discouraged by the Bahraini government. His article explores aspects of revolutionary cultural production and creative resistance in Bahrain since the uprisings in 2011, and examines the role social media has played in shaping and defining it. Focusing on memes, parody accounts,

and the YouTube serial *bahārna* drama, Owen Jones looks at the rise of political satire online, and the evolution of satirical forms over the progression of the uprising as a dialectic with government policy and propaganda, arguing that social media has facilitated the emergence of new forms of satire in Bahrain, and has allowed activists to assert, to both local and global audiences, and in different registers, the integrity of a desired revolutionary aesthetic by confronting state attempts to paint the revolution as schismatic and divisive. He further argues that the subversive nature of satire makes it a favorable genre with regards to revolutionary cultural production and the public sphere, while acknowledging that satirical forms, as a response to authoritarian policies, are rarely devoid of the tutelage necessary to make it a truly revolutionary form of counter narrative.

Jakob Skovgaard-Petersen explores how in June 2013 the cultural production environment mobilized against Egyptian President Morsi and his minister of culture, as a prelude to massive popular demonstrations and the removal of Morsi by the army. Cultural figures in Egypt prided themselves that they defended Egyptian culture against the onslaught of the Muslim Brotherhood and its Islamizing agenda, but what were the cultural policies of the Morsi government all about? Focusing on two controversial films about Egypt's Jews and Copts, respectively, Skovgaard-Petersen, examines the cultural policy agenda of the Muslim Brotherhood and its Freedom and Justice Party following their electoral victory in Egypt in January 2012, chronicling the cultural policies promised to pursue, the ones they actually undertook, and the political challenges posed by specific high-profile productions of the cultural sector, and arguing that Islamization

of cultural life may have been a long term goal, but not a priority in the Morsi government.

Leila Tayeb traces utopian impulses, following Ernst Bloch and José Esteban Muñoz, in three musical performances of 2011 Libya. She contends that these performances illustrate the militant optimism that characterized this historical moment in Libya and that reading them closely enables a nuanced engagement with Blochian theorizations of utopia as they are relevant to the quotidian both in seemingly unremarkable and in extraordinary times. Further, these close readings of the revolution's aesthetic performances can provide a methodology for coming closer to taking the revolution on its own terms and help us to better illuminate the critical potentialities of which the revolutionaries were themselves conscious.

Edward Ziter examines therapeutic theatre projects with Syrian refugees in Jordan and Lebanon, illustrating how these projects work at the intersection of the public and the private, facilitating individual healings while also promoting new group identities. He shows how the playing space becomes an open discursive field in which varied understandings of the self become platforms for new understandings of the nation. In the process, these artists/refugees trouble the boundaries between the private and the public, potentially creating a new public sphere that is not only revolutionary in its critique of entrenched political power but in its reformulation of the idea of the public itself. Closely examining one such project, *The Syria Trojan Woman*, directed by Omar Abu Saada, his paper places this work in the context of Abu Saada's work in applied theatre in Syria prior to the uprising and within the larger context of Syrian political theatre. Applied theatre, an umbrella term designating performance valued as efficacious as well as

aesthetic, has had a brief and difficult history in Syria because of its capacity to undermine the regulation of speech. In the case of *The Syria Trojan Woman*, this speech has traveled beyond the countries hosting refugees through the efforts of NGOs that bring additional fundraising and consciousness-raising objectives to the endeavor. Through international tours and the use of new media, local performances become international phenomenon, further complicating the idea of a revolutionary public sphere.

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Notes

ⁱ See also Zhao, Y., & Chakravartty, P. (Eds.). (2007). *Global communications: Toward a transcultural political economy*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

ⁱⁱ In Calhoun C. (1992), see chapters by Eley, Fraser and Warner. See also Landes J. B. (1988) *Women and the public sphere in the age of the French Revolution*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

ⁱⁱⁱ There has also been a focus on a putative “Muslim public sphere,” see Anderson, J. W. (2003). New media, new publics: Reconfiguring the public sphere of Islam. *Social Research*, 70(3): 887-906; Eickelman, D. & Salvatore, A. (2002). The public sphere and Muslim identities. *European Journal of Sociology*, 43, 92-115. We prefer “Arab public sphere” because a common language, as Habermas himself argued (“a natural language”), is a prerequisite for a public sphere. Having said this, religion can be an

important factor in the public sphere; see LeVine, M. and Salavatore, A. (2009). Religions mobilization and the public sphere: Reflections on alternative genealogies. In S. Shami, (Ed.) *Publics, politics and participation: Locating the public sphere in the Middle East and North Africa* (pp. 65-90). New York: Social Science Research Council.

^{iv} Specifically see chapters by Traboulsi and Kirli.

^v See also Dakhli, L. (2009). *Une generation d'intellectuels arabes: Syrie et Liban (1908-1940)*. Paris: IISMM–Karthala. Watenpaugh, K. D. (2006). *Being modern in the Middle East: Revolution, nationalism, colonialism and the Arab middle class*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

^{vi} Some notable exceptions: Downing, J. (2000). *Radical media: Rebellious communication and social movement*. London: Sage; Rodriguez, C. (2001) *Fissures in the mediascape: An international study of citizens' media*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press; Yang, G. (2009). *The power of the internet in China: Citizen activism online*. New York: Columbia University Press.

^{vii} For example Bayat, A. (2010). *Life as politics: How ordinary people change the Middle East*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press; Beinin, J. & Variel, F. Eds. (2011). *Social movements, mobilization, and contestation in the Middle East and North Africa, 2nd Ed.* Palo Alto: Stanford University Press.

^{viii} See, for example, Habermas (1996, particularly chapter 8), and Habermas (2011).

^{ix} For example: Agulhon, M. (1979). *Marianne au combat. L'imagerie et la symbolique républicaines de 1789 à 1880*. Paris: Flammarion]; De Baecque, A. (1988). *La caricature révolutionnaire*. Paris: Pressed du CNRS; Gough, H. (1988). *The newspaper press in the French Revolution*. London: Routledge; Hesse, C. (1991). *Publishing and cultural politics in revolutionary Paris, 1789–1810*. Berkeley: University of California Press; Hunt, L. (1984). *Politics, culture and class in the French Revolution*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Author Biographies

Marwan M. Kraidy is the Anthony Shadid Chair in Global Media, Politics and Culture and Director of the Center for Advanced Research in Global Communication, at the Annenberg School, University of Pennsylvania. Kraidy's publications include *Hybridity, or the Cultural Logic of Globalization* (Temple University Press, 2005); *Reality Television and Arab Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), which won three major prizes; and *The Naked Blogger of Cairo: Creative Insurgency in the Arab World*, published by Harvard University Press in May 2016. He tweets at @MKraidy.

Marina R. Krikorian is the Project Coordinator at the Center for Advanced Research in Global Communication (CARGC), Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania. She has an MA in Arab and Middle Eastern Studies from the American University of Beirut where her research focused on the Armenian diaspora in Lebanon.