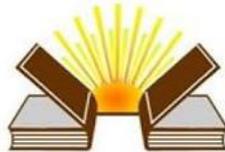


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# Media Construction of "Identities" in Morocco

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قد يترأى للباحثين في مجال الاعلام بأن البحوث التي أجريت في هذا الميدان هي كثيرة كافية لفهم الاعلام بجل وسائله و تعقيده و تجلياته, لكن ماذا عن المغرب؟ ماذا عن الإعلام و علاقته الشائكة بدول وجدت نفسها في خضم كم هائل من وسائل إعلامية جديدة و مؤثرة كالمغرب؟ ماذا عن الإعلام و تأثيره الصارخ على بلادنا؟ من الواضح أن البحوث التي تناولت هذا الموضوع هي قليلة جدا, قليلة و نادرة لدرجة لا تسمح لنا بتكوين فكرة و صورة واضحة عن جل التغيرات الحاصلة في المجتمع المغربي بسبب الاعلام بكل وسائله و دعاماته.

تتناول هذه الأطروحة مجموعة من المواضيع التي لها علاقة مباشرة بالإعلام و تأثيره على ع المغرب من خلال أجزاء ثلاثة. ينفرد الجزء الأول بمناقشة مطولة و مفصلة ل "الهوية" و "الثقافة" المغربية في ضل التحديات الراهنة, هي تحديات يفرضها الاعلام و بقوة على مجتمع يتقبل ألقابا عدة : "محافظ", "نامي", "منفتح" إلخ . في حين يتمحور الجزء الثاني حول السياسة في محاولة مستميتة لفهم دور الإعلام في الحراك السياسي و في التغيرات السياسية الجلية في مجتمعنا الحديث. أي علاقة هذه و أي تأثير؟ يعتبر الجزء الثاني من هذه الأطروحة لات المتعلقة بالسياسة في المغرب

ي خلق تغيير لافت في مواقف المواطن المغربي البسيط كما في مواقف السياسي المحنك. الجزء الثالث و الأخير من بحثنا هذا فيتناول المرأة المغربية من منظور قد يكون عالمي أي أنه يناقش و يقارن تأثير الإعلام على المرأة بصفة عامة هو تأثير قد يكون مظهري أحيانا و جوهري أحيانا أخرى. فإلى أي مدى استطاع الإعلام التأثير على هوية المرأة المغربية؟

تزودنا هذه الأطروحة بتفسير و تحليل دقيقين لجل التغيرات الحاصلة في مجتمعنا المغربي في محاولة لكشف تلك العلاقة الجلية تارة و الغامضة تارة أخرى بين الإعلام و دوره في التغيير الحاصل في المجتمع المغربي هو تغيير قد يصعب تصنيفه في خانة الإيجابي أو السلبي لكنه كائن و موجود و يستحيل تجاهله أو إنكاره.

## **Media Construction of “Identities” in Morocco**

Scholars all over the world have shown great concern on media and their effects on people; on their cultural practices, on political engagements, and on gendered perspectives. It is certainly clear that they widely differ in their perspectives and beliefs; yet, the overall image that emerges from literature is that media are powerful enough to change and construct our identities; the constant exposure to media can lead to tremendous deviations in our identities and thus the Moroccan identity is never an exception.

This current study presents some of the controversial discussions surrounding media, unravels some of the ways in which media shape and change identities in Morocco, and offers various analyses of different cultural, political and gendered occurrences to examine the extent to which media have been successful in delving into the Moroccan society.

Those different analyses of the several cultural, political and gendered occurrences in the Moroccan society yield explanations that complicate and sometimes even challenge three major assumptions that are the basic of this dissertation:

- 1) New emerging, even weird sometimes, cultural practices in the Moroccan society are due to national and international media; it goes without saying that Moroccans are highly open to different types of media and they usually expose themselves to local, national, and international products either through media,

ordinary forms of media -TV, Newspapers, Radio, etc- or through New media- mostly social media- These different types of media have several crucial impacts on the ordinary Moroccan citizen.

2) Moroccans' recent political engagement and outspoken demonstrations, stances and beliefs are the result of media's openness on politics. Media construction of a person's political identity is, indeed, a huge issue. The claim that media can shape a 'political identity' is in itself very debatable. Yet, it becomes crystal clear that the availability of media, especially social media, has provided Moroccans with various chances to freely express themselves about political issues mostly through Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, etc., and to also shape a kind of independent political stance due to the variety of political opinions they keep absorbing on a daily basis.

3) Moroccan women's changes in their appearances, behaviors, actions as well as their understanding of their sexuality are due to the images and messages they often get from media. Media is "deeply implicated in the process of defining and framing gender," (Aalberg and Jenssen 21) and is often the main engine behind the perpetration of gender stereotypes.

The different analyses provided in this study add nuance to our understanding of the several changes that keep taking place in the Moroccan society. This dissertation, which is part of a growing body of research on media's effects on Moroccans, is using a largely untapped source of Morocco's past and present histories; this project will contribute to future research on similar topics.

The nature of this research makes it necessary to deal with big terms and notions such as media, culture, identity, politics and gender. These key terms remain very debatable, and there is no exhaustive understanding or definition. The previously mentioned concepts- especially media, culture, and identity- create difficulties for most researchers. Yet, an attempt is made throughout the various pages of this dissertation to provide readers with a holistic understanding of the previously debatable concepts.

In the first part of this study, I establish the historical framework and introduce the different available definitions to key terms, namely; media, culture and identity, before briefly presenting some of the emblematic figures and their works. I examine the progress of media throughout history, the introduction of media to the Moroccan society, the ambiguities and debates surrounding these complicated notions of culture and identity, especially in a society that is characterized by heterogeneity and difference, and all the discussions related to the topic. I also show the possibilities of media to construct an identity and therefore the possibilities of shaping and changing the Moroccan identity as well.

The second major part of this research focuses on media and politics. I start the discussion by analyzing and examining the debatable relationship between media and politics in an attempt to answer the frequently repeated question: “which is affecting which?” The first two sections in this part are mere endeavors to solve the puzzle: are media influencing politics? Or is politics influencing media? Arguments presented in this discussion automatically lead us to another debate over propaganda.

I move, then, to the core of the second part which is media's ability to shape a different Moroccan political stance and belief and construct a concrete political action embodied in voting. Media construction of the Moroccan political identity is studied through three major subsections: (1) Al Jazeera and the Moroccan identity, the clearest aim of this subsection is to examine El Jazeera's influence over Moroccans, and to exhibit the channel's ability to make the audience act. (2) Press and politics, the general objective of the second subsection is to explore the extent to which press can affect politics in any possible context, and can guide and orient the audience towards a certain political belief or action. (3) Moroccan press and the Moroccan political identity is a more specific subsection dealing exclusively with the Moroccan press and its influence on the Moroccan reader. This part ends up with a clear conclusion which is that throughout history Moroccan audiences have proved to react and respond to various political calls; whether those calls have been national or international.

Media construction of the gendered Moroccan identity is the title given to the third part of this research. In this part, I, first, provide the terminological, social and cultural background of gender, in a desperate attempt to provide clear and exhaustive explanations to gender from a social and a cultural point of view, and then I move to discuss in detail the seldom admitted relationship between gender and ideology before briefly introducing some of the debates related to gender and sex.

The third part of this research deals with the Moroccan woman as a woman who belongs to the whole universe and as an entity that keeps experiencing what other women experience in any other possible tiny corner in the world. In other

words, the way media target women seems to be the same everywhere. I try to show in this chapter that what a Moroccan woman goes through due to media is what exactly an American woman, for instance, may experience as well. When it comes to women, media' messages are ironically the same; you should be thin, tall, attractive, educated, and funny.

This dissertation is an endeavor to answer various questions that haunt most scholars' mind who are interested in media studies. A question has been raised, from the very beginning of this research, about the possibility of constructing an identity through media to come up with one clear conclusion: media are more powerful than what we may think. The answer to this question was proved by the different theories to media; namely: the cultivation theory, agenda-setting theory, social action theory, and dependency theory. Much effort has been invested by writers all over the world to study media's effects and influences on people; media are affecting and changing our societies.

The only possible way to better study and reach the previously mentioned conclusion is through providing examples of the different changes that are happening due to media. Changes in the way Moroccans behave and react towards an event are many, yet, proving that those changes are due to media is the real challenge of this research. Grounding the relationship between behavioral changes and media have been the core of various studies which came up, through empirical work, with one clear conclusion which is that much of what we do is due to what we get from media.

In the introduction, various questions have been raised and the rest appear as endeavors to provide answers through the different parts of this research.

Whether media are behind the changes in our cultural practices and beliefs regardless of moral consideration, and whether media are the reason why new cultural aspects keep emerging in the Moroccan society seem to form the first question of this thesis. The only possible and available ways to answer this complex question are observation, comparison, and analysis. Observing the Moroccan society with all the emerging cultural changes, comparing the present with the past, analyzing the works of various researchers in the field and relating them to the Moroccan reality has led to one clear conclusion: Media are strongly influencing the Moroccan identity and culture or what is often labeled as the Moroccan cultural identity in the first part of this research.

It is really striking to state that media are shaping our cultural identity, and it remains always debatable to strongly claim that media are behind all the cultural changes in the Moroccan society. However, what is really clear is that media are powerful engines that are leading the Moroccan citizen towards change. Media are guiding our cultural practices, influencing our cultural and moral beliefs, and reinforcing new behaviors and occurrences in the Moroccan society. Media's ability to force change seems inevitable. The fact that new practices are emerging at the expense of other ones, and the fact that the majority of the "liked" practices are the ones media usually support is in itself a clear indicator of media's subtle and strong influence on Moroccans.

The second major question of this research is whether media can construct a political identity, and whether they can lead Moroccans to politically act and change. The nature of this question has made it necessary to look at Moroccans from a historical point of view. How Moroccans responded to certain political

events in the past and how they are currently responding to the different political dilemmas inside and outside Morocco and who is behind the well-noticed change in their political awareness seem to be the core of the second part of this thesis. Politics, which used to be one of the taboos in the country in the last few decades, appears as a fresh topic that Moroccans seem to enjoy talking about. Still, what seems interesting in this part is the role of media in the change, the ability of media to construct a new political stance, and the possibilities of changing the available political scenarios and agendas in the country due to media.

Can media orient Moroccans' political inclination and preference? The apparent answer to this question is "Yes". Throughout history, Moroccans proved to respond easily to various media's messages and to act in the way media wanted them to; the positive answer is not derived from a vacuum but from a detailed presented analysis of the 2007 and 2012 elections in Morocco. The famous Moroccan journalist Ali Al Mourabit described Moroccans in *Saheefa Al Maghribiya* (Issue No.29 of April 7, 2008) as "Media' puppets" in a desperate attempt to express his rage, anger and disappointment about the results of the 2007 elections in the country. Accordingly, the 2007 elections showed the extent to which Moroccans can be easily manipulated by the media.

Which is influencing which? Which is controlling which? Is politics playing the role of the boss in the game or are media taking politicians to previously planned directions? Researchers differ in the way they usually perceive this controversial relationship between media and politics; some do strongly believe that politicians have a strong and a complete control over media images when they produce their campaign commercials. A complete control over media images means, in a way or

in another, that a control over voters' decisions powerfully exists. Voters receive information about candidates from campaign commercials and news coverage, and it is the perfection of what is presented on media that makes the difference. It can be said that Media have become more important and more influential in the political world than ever before due to the unprecedented evolution in media images and texts, and that those images and texts are always at the disposal of politicians.

Others take a different vein by stating that politicians are in fact under the mercy of media. Bernard Cohen claims that media "may not be successful in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about" (13). This ability of media to direct people's attention toward certain issues is well known as "Agenda setting" (15). It highlights the important role that media workers play in selecting and shaping certain beliefs and opinions. This idea goes hand in hand with the public's general perception that media play a very influential role in politics.

Various studies, using a range of methods, have also shown that media information is mostly used by citizens to develop their political beliefs. Garber seems to be a strong believer of media's unquestioned influences on individuals, and mainly on voters. However, media effects should be understood in subtler terms than simply their ability to change the mind of a potential voter. The long-term cumulative exposure to media must be considered as well. The ability of media to shape new political mentalities, new opinions and beliefs should not be regarded as being short-lived or perfunctory by simply besieging them in voting but as long-lived effects that can change political stances of people all over the

world, that can shape a political belief, and that can shape a political identity of people in Morocco as well.

The general conclusion of this debatable question ‘which is influencing which?’ is that the influence is mutual especially in the Moroccan context; people in power, people who have money and people who have authority can control and guide media to an extreme extent but since power is shared by a group of politicians who keep fighting for it, media appear as an influential tool in their hand as well leading to a counter influence. The winner is usually the one who can play the game according to media rules.

Questions about the importance of the new media in the political realm also appear in this research. Davis and Owen examined all forms of “new media”, as they are broadly defined, that play a political role but have primarily nonpolitical origins. In addition to the different social networking sites or the internet in general, this includes media forms such as talk radio, TV talk shows, television newsmagazines, and cable news. Moroccans do feel politically engaged thanks to the different forms of new media especially the new social networking sites such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, etc. The different social media are spaces where Moroccans develop a kind of a political awareness and a political stance and inclination as well. It is there where usually an identity rises and develops. The effects of the different forms of media or new media are inescapable and undeniable on the ordinary Moroccan citizen.

The study shows as well that a political identity cannot be shaped or constructed without freedom of speech. It is widely known that whether in constitution, or in the law of Press or other laws related to media, there are

guarantees that either concern the freedom of speech in general or the freedom of press in particular, or even with the freedom of the journalists and media outlets association, or the right to access information. However, these guarantees find themselves surrounded by other conditions limiting them; those conditions usually hinder the construction process of a political identity. As it is mentioned earlier in the second part of this research, it remains always very difficult to speak of media construction of identity where freedom of speech seems limited and besieged.

A further attempt is made here to show how media are affecting women in Morocco. Media effects on women are recognizable in all societies, and the major answer that is available is that Moroccan women are not an exception of the rule; they are, like all women in the world, undergoing various changes in their psyche as well as their appearance due to media. Media effects on women are huge.

Finally, it is also fundamental to note that the last part of this research states it clearly that the construction of the gendered identity of Moroccan women is usually done through the stereotypical media. Reinforcing the often repeated stereotypes lead women to respond positively to those stereotypes in a desperate attempt to meet media standards. Media messages are clear: women should be thin, elegant, sexy, funny, etc. It is not a surprise then to see women doing their best to meet some extraordinary standards not to feel themselves out of the trend or out of the group.