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Media use at the crossroads: Nicosia

Fatima El-Issawi and Myria Georgiou

Introduction

Cyprus has always been a crossroads between continental Europe and the Middle East and the history of migration from this region to the eastern Mediterranean island can be traced back more than two thousand years. Contemporary migration has had its distinct history with significant waves of refugees migrating from the Middle East to Cyprus since the 1960s. In these recent times, Lebanese and Palestinians have become the two largest groups of migrants to Cyprus. In addition, since the turn of the 21st century and with the growth of the Cypriot economy, smaller waves of economic migrants from the Middle East and Northern Africa have moved to Cyprus. Although Arabic migration spreads across the island, an established Arab community sustains a strong and long-standing presence in Nicosia, the capital. For this study we recruited individuals from different social and ethnic backgrounds, including Middle Eastern migrants and Cypriot-born migrants from locations such as Lebanon and Palestine especially, but also newcomers from the Gulf region and North Africa. This article is based on six focus groups of three different age groups (three female and three male; age groups: 18–25, 26–45, 46+) conducted in Nicosia, Cyprus, in June 2009. Each focus group included between six and eight participants of various Arabic backgrounds. The Nicosia focus groups have tended to reflect the distinct cultural position Arab participants occupy in contemporary South Eastern Europe (i.e. being primarily refugees living close to the Middle East). Thus, the focus groups revealed a number of distinct characteristics compared to the focus groups in other countries included in the Media and Citizenship study. Most importantly, among the Nicosia participants, we observed more participants identifying as cosmopolitan subjects compared to any other group studied in the seven EU capitals. In addition, a significant number of participants described diverse and rich media practices, which construct multilingual media worlds that include media in various European languages, as well as Arabic national and transnational media.

Media practices All participants are regular television users and for most of them television viewing combines transnational Arabic and western channels, national broadcasts from their country of origin and, to a lesser extent, programmes on national Cypriot television. Their viewing is usually attached to family and kin connections and shared daily experience, mostly cross-generational within the family and partly in networks of friends. The choices of programmes consumed tend to reflect negotiations of media choices within the familial domestic sphere, with decisions being primarily taken by the oldest family members. In many cases, the family becomes divided in its practices and then media consumption becomes fragmented, especially on the basis of age, gender and linguistic ability. In the case of traditional families the choice is left to the father (especially for news) and to other male family members. Most of the participants describe shifts on the level of their media consumption at different hours of the day and, depending on their work patterns, they describe regular shifts between communal and individual use of the media at home. The migrant generation tends to recognize the complexity of the younger generations' cultural identities, as reflected in their media choices. In the words of a female participant:

My kids are not interested in Arab news, this is why we have two satellite dishes and two television sets at home. (Female, 46+)

Though the research recorded this internal diversity in viewing preferences, transnational Arabic channels – especially the news channels Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya – stand out as a primary reference. In the second place come the transnational western news channels, especially the BBC, with a more reluctant viewing of American news channels, such as CNN. Almost all participants watch national channels from the Middle East. Watching national channels does not mean that participants rely on them as the sole source of news. What these channels mostly seem to provide is a social and emotional link to their country of origin. Only in a few cases are the Cypriot national channels referred to as part of the media choices. Many of the participants consider Cypriot television as irrelevant to their social world. Only the youngest females refer to Cypriot channels as a significant element of their media consumption. They especially refer to them as tools to understanding the Cypriot society and to learning the Greek language. This comes as no surprise as most of them have been born in Cyprus or have moved to Cyprus at a very young age. What most participants describe is their regular consumption of transnational news programmes. Though the core references are the two main Arabic satellite broadcasters – Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya – it is important to highlight the persistent presence of the main western news media channels, especially the BBC, in their everyday life.

I follow Al Jazeera, then Al Arabiya and BBC in Arabic and English language, and I follow the websites which have chat rooms about the political events to know many points of views. I also follow the direct coverage of important events, on Arab or western channels. (Male, 26–45)

There is a general understanding among participants that western transnational channels are for news as they are more focused on the events. Most participants consider Arab media as highly politicized, focusing on analysis and reflecting particular political agendas. At the same time, some participants are equally critical towards western transnational channels, which they see as biased against Arabs and as reflecting a distorted image of the Arab world and Arabs living in the West. For those critical viewers, the Arab transnational media provide a counterpoint to what they see as imperialist, biased, or distorting ideological positions produced and reproduced in western media. Importantly even for those participants, western media often represent an element of their media worlds.

When I need to learn urgently about an event, I watch the BBC English, when I have more time, I turn to Arabic television. I feel that Arab media have not till now taken the lead from the western media. I usually do zapping, but I always watch BBC English and French channels. I watch Arab channels but I can guess what they will say, it depends also on the news. In the case of Iranian elections, I watched also Al Manar. It was amazing to see how they were trying to reflect a peaceful image of the situation. (Male, 46+)

Transnational Arabic television does not only represent the major source of information for participants but it seems to largely frame perception of major crises in the Middle East. In discussing crises in the Middle East, participants draw from thematic and ideological representations in Arabic channels. Perhaps these representations also function as a tool to reinforce their emotional attachment to their countries of origin and provide a link between them and their present position.

Citizenship, identity and belonging

Across the group we have observed a dominant tendency to dissociate one's self from the identity of the 'immigrant'. For the members of the group who have been in Cyprus for a long period (or have

been born there), the status of the 'immigrant' appears foreign. Instead, they prefer to define their status on the basis of 'staying' in Cyprus. This repeatedly observed attempt to distance themselves from the 'immigrant' identity reflects a widespread attempt among the participants to identify as cosmopolitan subjects; this discourse was much more widespread in the case of Cyprus than in any of the other countries in our study. For most, Cyprus is considered as a land of peace and tranquillity, allowing them to stay close to the Middle East and to keep open connections with both Europe and their region of origin. Many of them describe Cyprus as their home and almost everyone stresses that they have positive connections with Cypriots – these include work relations, friendships, and sometimes marriage. A small group of participants emphasize that they still have a sense of being considered as others even when they have lived in Cyprus for decades. An important element of many participants' ideology is the almost universal attempt to make Cyprus a place of their own, a space that captures specific meanings attached to their experience of migration. For Palestinians, it is a substitute for a lost land; in Cyprus, they can enjoy close proximity to the Palestinian Territories without having the feeling of being rejected refugees (as they feel is the case in most Arab countries). For Lebanese, the island is almost a metaphorical designation of a Lebanese district, especially because of its geographic proximity. For some, it is a heaven of freedom, for others, it is a heaven of sunshine and warm relationships. Overall, there is a tendency to combine a strong sense of belonging to their country of origin with a cosmopolitan outlook:

I am an Iraqi refugee because I cannot go back to my country. If I go back to Iraq, I need a good school, safety, freedom, everything I have here, the same lifestyle ... I cannot say I am Iraqi Cypriot, I am only Iraqi but I can say Cyprus is my second country. (Female, 18–25)

I don't consider myself immigrant, I don't like this feeling, I feel as an international citizen, I don't feel a conflict between being Lebanese Arab and living here, this is why I cannot live in US or Canada. (Male, 46+)

My country is where I can gain enough money to eat. These days we are defined as economical refugees. I have another citizenship and I am loyal to it, but here I feel they treat me as a human being. I educate my kids to respect the country where they live but I also teach them our religion and our language and most importantly the fact that they are Syrians. (Male, 46+)

For most participants, citizenship has a narrow meaning and is primarily attached to the legal framework that defines their status in relation to formal rights and responsibilities. Holding a long-term residency status or having a Cypriot citizenship seems very important for participants, especially in relation to its practical benefits: safety, security and high level of mobility across Europe. Though citizenship represents an area of rational choice, for Palestinians, citizenship touches the emotional zone as well. As mentioned by some of them, gaining citizenship after being refugees for many years changes their condition of living.

In my family, citizenship was a word we lived with. We know that sooner or later, we will have to get a different citizenship [i.e. other than Palestinian] ... It is mainly about [having a] pass- port because I don't belong to any country. (Female, 26–45)

Friendships and long-term connections with Cypriots are common among participants. They refer to the friendly attitudes of Cypriots as enabling their participation in the local society. Their participation varies from reading the local newspapers (widely observed) to participating in political events (in only a few cases). Surprisingly, the large majority of them say they vote in Cyprus and not in their country of origin, as they trust the political system in Cyprus more than they trust it in their

country of origin. This kind of engagement explains the fact that they are all at least fairly well informed about political life in Cyprus.

I vote here and I feel I can contribute to changing the results. (Female, 46–65)

I follow their news through the local newspapers and through emails I receive from friends ...
I choose to learn Modern Greek at university. This is a decision to integrate. (Female, 26–45)

While national and transnational media represent a key element of participants' every-day life, they are often critical of the national Cypriot media and other media from the West. Media are often seen as reproducing a sense of otherness and as boundary-setters between groups.

The only thing I remember [watching on Cypriot television] was the crisis of Islamic veil in schools in France. Then they focused on Arab migrants because of this problem, but only in France, and only in relation to Moroccan and Algerians. They mention us only when there is a newsy crisis. (Female, 26–45)

Unlike national television, the internet is in many cases praised as a tool in preserving links with the country of origin and with family and friends around the world.

I have two chat programmes [on my PC] to communicate with my fiancée who is in Jordan. This is how I don't feel far from home. We don't live in Syria but it is very easy to chat with our family there and to hear of their news. (Female, 18–25)

Conclusion

The Arab migration to Cyprus represents a unique experience of Arabic transnationalism within Europe, but also reflects wider issues in relation to migration, the sense of belonging and media consumption among Arabs living in Europe. For many participants, the position of in-betweenness, with Cyprus representing a location between the Middle East and Europe, reflects an ongoing journey of migration and transnational mobility. As illustrated in various occasions and captured in the discussion above, Cyprus as a cultural and geographical context does not force the participants to make a clear choice between 'home' and 'away'. This in-betweenness described by various participants might relate to what Beck describes as the dialogical imagination (2006) that surpasses the binary of either/or but which relates mostly to this and that, i.e. the possibility of holding different cultural positions, without having to make singular and definite choices for the future.

Arabic transnational media play a dual role in this context. On the one hand, they are daily reminders of a diasporic position (especially when they engage in debates about the Middle East and give rise to a transnational Arabic public sphere). On the other hand, they are part of a complex system of media consumption that links Arab speakers in Cyprus to the rest of the world, and which reconfirms their transnational position.

References

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