

10. Concluding Remarks

This work investigated the relationship between the notion of agency and the Arab television media's representation of the experiences of displaced women during war and conflict. Its aim was to examine how the concepts of *violence*, *vulnerability*, *resilience*, and *resistance* were represented in the dominant media discourses. I explored how dominant media narratives driven by elitist ideals and humanitarian thinking impact the television media frames in news reports. Different experiences of displaced Syrian women during the recent conflict in Syria were chosen as a case study. The Syrian conflict has been covered extensively by many Arab television stations with diversified media ownership structures and different socio-political agendas. The displaced Syrian communities have witnessed many changes and continue to be drastically impacted by the conflict. At the same time, different Arab television stations have constructed the ever-changing gender realities experienced by different displaced Syrian women in the news. These factors rendered the case study challenging.

I began contextualizing the case study within current and previous debates concerning power, neoliberal ideals, gender politics in the context of displacement, exile, and the female body during war and conflict. The account then shifted to reflect on the experience of displaced Syrian women during the Syrian conflict in recent news reports published between 2013 and 2018 by seven different television stations, *Al Aan*, *Al Jazeera*, *Al Arabiya*, *SANA*, *SAMA*, *Syria Al Ikhbariyah*, and *RT Arabic*.

By employing a critical discourse analysis, I examined 32 news reports. The research found that the mediated representations in the television news could be traced based on five main dominant media frames:

- (a) Women as a source of shame
- (b) Women as victims of their previous imprisonment
- (c) Females as destined child brides

- (d) Women as the neoliberal subject
- (e) Women as mothers of the nation

These media frames were constructed by seven different procedures of media reporting:

- (a) The circulation of shame
- (b) Stigmatizing the female victim
- (c) De-humanization by misrecognized female desire
- (d) Sentimental de-politization
- (e) Strategic silencing
- (f) De-historicization
- (g) Nationalizing the female body

Throughout the news report analysis, I found that dominant media narratives in the television reporting at times were shaped by an elitist discourse and, at other times, by a humanitarian one. The sociopolitical views and the media ownership of the television station played a role in creating biases and blind spots in the news. In the television reporting, certain groups of Syrian women were rendered virtually invisible while others became hyper visible. I also found that a neoliberal agenda in the television news had influenced the mediated representations of the experiences of Syrian women in exile, as the depictions of their state of victimhood and vulnerability carried absent alternatives and hidden consequences.

Furthermore, the research showed that the agentic attempts by different groups of displaced Syrian women were either glorified, misconstrued, or left unrecognized by the dominant media narratives. I argued that the visibility of different groups of Syrian women and how their experiences were framed in the news should also be considered in the context of the geopolitical tensions in the Arab region. While the media frames in the Arab television news may shift and change in the future – depending on different context, sociopolitical views and media ownership structures – the mediated representations should always be read as *symptomatic* to broader issues around nationalism, neoliberalism, gender politics, conflict, and (geo)political tensions.

This research project has several limitations that hopefully will be tackled in future studies on gender, conflict, and media. The research design ignored other Arab and non-Syrian women who are also suffering from violent conflict, and there are also other groups of displaced Syrian women who did not appear in the news reports analyzed in this research's case study. For in-

stance, throughout the sampling process, I found only one news report – by *Al Jazeera* – that depicted displaced Syrian women doing sex work in Lebanon as source income while in exile. These groups of women inhabit distinct socio-economic realities that ought to be examined in future research.

Furthermore, this research analyzed news reports published within a narrow time period, the years between 2013-2018. The Syrian conflict consists of ongoing series of violent events that may continue or end unexpectedly. Although the research project analyzed news reports from seven different Arab television stations that have different sociopolitical views and media ownership structures, it nevertheless overlooked the television reporting produced by Kurdish militias and ISIS, which are both major actors in the Syrian conflict. Because I have no knowledge in the Kurdish language, I was not able to analyze the content on Rojava TV. I also did not have any online public access to ISIS television station on Nilesat.

This project can be developed in many different ways. As previously mentioned, the research was limited to analyzing the encoding stage of the message; thus, the examination of the decoding of the public spectacle in the news is one route to take this further this research project. Journalistic coverage of distant suffering has been widely examined in academic studies, particularly with respect to how Western audiences decode news from mainstream media reporting on global crises. There is very little literature on how audiences in the Arab world decode such messages, particularly from Arabic speaking media outlets covering war and conflict. Pruce (2019) asserted that media content on distant suffering during war, conflict and crises, is:

“...likely to include media products of human rights and humanitarian organizations. Similar considerations apply to news outlets and NGOs: What are our duties? To what ethical codes are we bound? What is effective in galvanizing the audience? Technology institutionalizes this debate at the intersection of emotion, communication, and politics by insisting that audiences wrestle with their obligations to suffering strangers. But what about the relationship among television viewers? If we all watch the same event at the same time through the same medium, do we become greater than the sum of our component parts? Is an audience truly a citizenry?” (p. 78).

So, when audiences act as transnational witnesses of victims of war and conflict, does the decoded message produce a sense of responsibility in the viewer, a sort of reaction prompting the need to act?

The findings in this research project reflected on how viewers consume spectacles of graphic images portraying distant suffering, whilst the perpetuated media messages perpetuated have contributed to providing cultural products of neoliberal capitalism. Therefore, the important question here is: What do these graphic images of distant suffering tell the viewers, particularly viewers who are members of advocacy groups and human rights communities, Pruce (2019) asks, and how does “transnational citizen advocacy in a social world structured and saturated by visuality” develop (p. 79)?

In today’s digital media age, the viewer has wide access to information and is constantly witnessing human rights abuses and violations through videos, as well as satellite image, which are being circulated and disseminated faster and with greater influence than in the past. Thus, another question to address here would be: What do these technological capabilities have to offer viewers, particularly members of human rights groups? Is being aware of human rights abuses and spreading an awareness of human rights abuses sufficient to stop such abuses? And, if the viewer is transformed into “a mere spectator” of those violations, how can collective action emerge from simply bearing witness to the graphic images being circulated?

Another major finding showed that the narrative in news reports prioritized the role humanitarian initiatives play in tackling the plight of displaced Syrian women, without giving focusing on the political significance of suffering in exile. In this context, the news reporting celebrated the dignity of the victim by relying heavily on a humanitarian discourse to encode the message. Thus, it would be fruitful to further explore how such news reports are decoded by the viewer. What happens when the viewer establishes a relationship with the victims by seeing them suffer? What happens when the news celebrates the dignity of the victims by exposing the humanitarian initiatives that have taken place? Does the viewer feel relieved, and, if so, is the plight of the victim depoliticized in the eyes of the viewer? Another way to explore the decoding of the message is to ask what effects the spectacle of poverty, crisis, war, and catastrophe produce among the viewers? Can compassion “paradoxically prove to be an emotion that spares those feeling it from having to take more demanding action?” (Fassin, 2012, p. 180).

After providing a list of questions that serve as insights for future research, I close this chapter by reasserting the importance of spaces of appearance. With the rise of the human rights crises in the Global South and the deterioration of refugees and migrant rights across the world (Stevenson 2014; Rheindorf & Wodak 2017; Hollenbach 2019), “the ability to take part

in political debates and discussions of justice” (Agamben, 2000) becomes increasingly fundamental to the issue of inequality.

“There is no doubt that the fragmentation of media spaces (with personal media and social media, for example)” and “the diffusion of communication technologies has benefited” displaced communities, refugees, and “other dispersed groups” (Georgiou, 2012, p. 794). Nonetheless, the digital divide or “the uneven distribution of information and communication technologies in society” (Schweitzer, 2008), along with the growing difficulty of gaining refugee status and the lack of access to membership in society, is leaving the most vulnerable groups in society with increased difficulty to take part of the debates on injustice and inequality. Granted, these groups continue to suffer from the expansion of “surplus humanity” (Ticktin, 2010; Robinson & Baker, 2019).

Examining biases in media coverage will always remain significant in the field of communications studies. Nonetheless, it is also crucial to recognize how particular methodological approaches may hinder our ability to engage with and listen to the subaltern and identify their agency. Instead of “repeating the power relations inscribed in the epistemological practices of Western social-scientific research” (Nikunen, 2020), we need to prioritize methodological choices that enable researchers to explore the spaces of appearance; spaces where the subaltern is “voicing their interests” and providing “alternative sets of representations against hegemonic ones” (Georgiou, 2012, p. 794).

