Between the Mediated and the Performed: an empirical contribution to understanding Arabic public spheres

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Between the Mediated and the Performed: an empirical contribution to understanding Arabic public spheres

By: Deena Dajani

A Doctoral Thesis
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Abstract

The notion of a nascent Arabic public sphere vis-à-vis the region’s transnational news networks has been at the centre of much debate. However, this debate is met with little empirical grounding as well as a conceptual limitation to discussing political publics. This thesis seeks to contribute to and inform current debates by means of an empirical exploration of Arabic public spheres across the mediated-political realm of news media as well as the performative-cultural sphere of interactive theatre. The Jordanian parliamentary elections of November 2007 offer a framework for the research which is made up of two case studies. The first case study examines the portrayal and representation of Jordanian citizens in the news coverage of the parliamentary elections. Four transnational broadcasters (al-Jazeera, al-Arabiya, al-Hurra and JTV) were monitored during the lead up to and post the elections (over a month’s duration) and different modes of participation were identified in the coverage. The second case study explores the ways in which Jordanian citizens participated in interactive theatre performances about the elections across Jordan. The performances were specifically developed to elicit responses from audiences in the form of discussion as well as role playing (in which the audiences assume the roles of citizens in a town hall meeting). Results from the two case studies revealed significant differences in the ways in which citizens participated, or were portrayed as participating, across the political and cultural spheres. The transnational media portrayed citizens largely as “observers” of the political process and, less frequently, as “commentators” on issues of public concern. The mediated public sphere was also found to be gendered and afforded Jordanian women less presence and access to participate. On the other hand, the cultural public sphere afforded citizens spaces to discuss issues of public concern as well as contest dominant and exclusionary narratives within their societies. Jordanian women were also found to “negotiate change” through the reinterpretation of the symbolic. These findings demonstrate that confining our understanding of Arabic public spheres to the political-mediated marginalises the diverse ways in which citizens do participate, particularly so in the case of women.

Key words:

Arabic public sphere, transnational Arabic-language media, Jordan, interactive theatre, development of theatre in the Arab world, gender and the public sphere.
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... and then providing me with lots of blank paper on which to draw my own lines, holding my scribbles up, and saying ‘wow’.

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Introduction: Rethinking the Arabic Public Sphere

The discursive holds a central place in the historical narrative of Arabia. Before the coming of Islam, an age now referred to as that of Jahiliya [ignorance], an annual Souk [market] by the name of Ukaz used to lure the most articulate of men to the Meccan-like-ecclesia to recite their poetry. The orations ranged from declarations of love and passion to verses of ideological contestation; the literary and the political deeply intertwined.

Souk Ukaz was a space for men. Women appeared in the orator’s verses, as objects of adoration, fantasy or scorn. It was also a space for men with resources, or at least those with enough to master their language and oratory skills as an ultimate demonstration of ‘pride’, ‘dignity’ and ‘honour’. The most acclaimed poems, those that exhibited mastery of language, were awarded by being inscribed in gold and then hung in al-Ka’bah. Seven of these poems (or ten by other historians) survive today, known as the Mu’allqat [literally: the Hanging Ones; in Arabic, the word mu’allaqa can also be translated as ‘cling’ in the sense of sticking to one’s memory, so the name implies a dual meaning].

Beyond the annual Souk Ukaz, and on a more regular basis, was the Majlis [literally: the place where one sits, meaning: a place for gathering]. Throughout the Islamic Caliphates and well into the early history of state formation, the Majlis was primarily a site for Shura [consultation], the Islamic normative equivalent to discussing issues of public concern that are not addressed by the Qur’an or the Sunah [the Prophet Muhammad’s sayings or life practices]. Attended by the Caliph or Emir as well as his aides, the Majlis was open to and accessible by all citizens regardless of rank or class. Although the Majlis was not the vehicle of government, it did complement and inform the policies of the state. I remember being told in school that the Majlis was a regular event where everything and anything could be discussed; when I embarked on researching this thesis I found no resource tracing the history of the Majlis, just a few scattered mentions without much elaboration. Herein lies the fragility of Arab history; large amounts of it remain oral histories that are yet to be gathered, transcribed and committed to paper.

On an online Jordanian forum called Urdun Mubdi3 [Creative Jordan], Nadine Toukan asks if the internet is the Arab world’s Majlis 2.0. She describes the Majlis of once upon a time as a space where people from all walks of life would engage in conversation, from artists and
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poets to scientists, educators and athletes (17/4/2010: www.urdunmubdi3.ning.com). To Toukan, the advent of television in the region, and its control by Arab governments, came to erode the Majlis and the spaces for counter-culture it sustained. She explains that, “Civil society became passive recipients of information” both from the government who used the medium for their “delusions of control” as well as the private sector who used it to “disseminate press releases”; these linear relationships were, and continue to be, bereft of communicative substance (ibid).

Toukan’s assessment reads similar to Habermas’s frustration over the decline of the bourgeois public sphere in Western European societies with the exception that Toukan ends on a hopeful note: she passionately believes that online and multiplatform communication have facilitated the creation of networks and conversations that are beginning to evolve and have effect offline, bearing influence on administrations. It is in this light that she calls the internet the Arab world’s Majlis 2.0 (ibid.)

One would expect the Arab world to have changed a lot since the early days of discursive oration, and in many aspects it has. The spread of Islam and subsequent conquests created an empire larger than that of Rome “at its zenith” (Hitti 1970: 4). New cultures and traditions were encountered and incorporated, but the destiny of all empires was to befall the Arabs too. The Mongol invasion heralded a brutal occupation that lasted over 150 years; their rule was bequeathed to the Ottoman Sultans who presided over Arab lands and peoples for a further 400 years. Post-WW1 and the defeat of the Ottomans the British and French introduced boundaries across the expanse of Arabia, birthing the twenty two countries making up the Arab world today. Modern histories of the Middle East often begin here.

Perhaps all this is irrelevant; history is always written by the victors and it is only when they revolt that the oppressed are taken note of in history books. Thus, perhaps denying the Arab peoples the possibility of existing public spheres falls within this narrative. The consensus view, after all, holds that an Arabic public sphere is emerging, and the often cited instigators are the transnational news networks that accompanied the introduction of satellite dishes in the region beginning in the mid 1990s. Sadly, it is not within the scope of this thesis to investigate the existence (and possibly: migration) of public spaces in the region since the early days of discursive oration. However, this thesis does relate to the ways in which public spheres do exist in the Arab world, and as follows, conceives of transnational news networks as sites of
mediation, not creation. Souk Ukaz and the Majlis are examples of organic Arabic ‘participatory’ traditions that could inform normative understandings of the Arabic public sphere and even contribute to the universality of the public sphere theory. With the little information available, they appear to complement Habermas’s arguments relating to the relationship between the cultural and the political, and how spaces for the genesis of ideas inform and feed into discussions over public issues. There are also notable differences; the consultative nature of the Majlis gatherings, for example, complementary to Islamic rule and philosophy, remains different to Habermas’s deliberating coffee-house publics.

As such, this thesis does hold that the Arabic public sphere is not ‘nascent’ nor is it the ‘creation’ of transnational news networks in the Arab world. This is a departure from the consensus view which, up until this moment, has debated the Arabic public sphere almost exclusively within the scope of transnational media (see Zayani 2008, Fandy 2007, El-Nawawy and Iskandar 2002 and others, all cited in more depth in Chapter V). If there is one conclusion to this thesis that I hope to demonstrate in the coming chapters, it is that the Arabic public sphere needs to be understood within a wider framework that accounts for the processes of public contestation and negotiation of power, in the form of citizen ‘public sphering’, both political and sociocultural. Indeed, this argument has also been advanced in the context of normative public sphere theories; to Dahlgren,

“If Habermas’ theoretical step in conceptualizing the public sphere was an immensely valuable step, no one, not even Habermas himself, would argue that we should remain fully within those initial formulations. We must see the public sphere partly as an ideal we aim for a direction charted. It always remains (in the best of cases) a political accomplishment, ever in need of renewal, and we should avoid clutching an historically frozen model. It is an historically contingent space, negotiated and contested, situated at the interface of an array of vectors. It is structured by macrosocietal factors and shaped by the mass media, especially television. Yet ... it is also socioculturally constructed by the discursive practices of civil society.” (1995: 23).

A similar rationale is advanced in Chapter I that seeks to reframe current debates on the Arabic public sphere in order to account for sociocultural interaction as a form of ‘public sphering’ (another phrase I borrow from Dahlgren), that transcends across the political and the social, the mediated and the everyday. In this regard, Chapter I is both a literature review of the
public sphere theory (Habermas’s and his critics’) as well as an argument for expanding current understandings of the Arabic public sphere. As such, Chapter I could also serve as a synthesis or discussion chapter that outlines this thesis’s contribution to the field. Its placement in this thesis as a literature review chapter corresponds to traditional structures of theses writing that logically progress from theory, to methodological practice, and culminate in findings and conclusions. Whilst the thesis conforms to this structure, I feel it is necessary here to outline the line of thought which guided the research process. It must be noted that this thesis never started with a clear cut hypothesis or research plan, and was guided by an exploratory approach to a field of study that remains under researched. The process of ‘connecting the dots’, or rather, lines of thought, was not a linear one.

A review of available literature on the Arabic public sphere, in the more traditional sense, is provided in Chapter V. This is where my research interest in the field began. Chapter V provides an overview of literature on the Arabic public sphere and outlines two identifiable ‘camps’ in the field; the first, identified as the “cautious optimists” are interested in the ways in which transnational news media in the Arab world are bypassing state regulation and providing spaces for the articulation of opposing narratives. On the other hand, the “structural sceptics” argue that the margin of freedom tolerated on transnational networks has been inconsequential and has not been met by tangible reform within Arab states. In addition, structural sceptics insist that the lack of structural safeguards that protect public participation, such as the freedom to assemble and express oneself, negate the emergence of an Arabic public sphere.

These debates on the ‘nascent’ Arabic public sphere have emerged following the launch of al-Jazeera in 1996 and its contentious programming which raised issues previously sidelined by existing (government controlled) news broadcasters. Initially, reactions to the channel were marked by fascination; el-Nawawy and Iskandar (2002), for example, describe it as a phenomenon capable of expanding freedom of speech in the region and ushering in more democratic communications systems. But nearly a decade later, with another dozen channels emulating al-Jazeera’s style launched, the absence of structural changes in Arab governments propelled sceptics such as Zayani (2005a and 2008) to refute the capacity of news media to act as ‘rational-deliberative’ public spheres. Rather, Zayani argues that the transnational networks are mere “safety-valves” that allow citizens to vent their frustration whilst maintaining the status quo of inequality. Fandy (2007) similarly dismisses the ‘public making’ capacity of news media by looking at the structural underpinnings of the new media scene and the ways in which
seemingly “courageous” broadcasters follow the agenda of the their bank-rollers; in the case of al-Jazeera its financial “sponsor” is the Emir of Qatar while the channel’s main rival al-Arabiya is reputedly sponsored by the Saudi Arabian royal family (incidentally, long-time foes of the Qatari regime).

It was from here that I began to engage with normative theories of the public sphere, most notably Habermas (1989), Fraser (1990) and Dahlgren (1995). This allowed the realisation that current debates on the Arabic public sphere largely portrayed it as an ahistorical ‘product’. Both the cautious optimists and the structural sceptics, by discussing the Arabic public sphere solely through the confines of the transnational media, neglected (and continue to neglect) to think of the ways in which public spheres are processes of engagement, contestation and, at times, deliberation. In so doing, current debates on the Arabic public sphere deny the Arab peoples their very “publicness” both historically (by insisting that publics are only now emerging or not) as well as culturally (by assuming that Arab citizens do not act as a public that challenges hierarchies and stratification beyond that ‘dictated’ by the news networks). By rejecting both these arguments, which largely frame current debates on the Arabic public sphere, this thesis assumes that Arabic public spheres do exist, albeit it accepts that they do so in weaker forms. More importantly, even when Arabic public spheres are ‘apparent’ or ‘quasi’, the thesis holds that ‘public sphering’, as a form of citizen contestation and negotiation of power, continues to survive.

Thus, through engaging with normative theories of the public sphere, three limitations of current understandings of the Arabic public sphere can be identified. Firstly, the citationary (as opposed to empirical) nature of the debates; although relevant and interesting, discussions in the field are too often constricted to citing and answering each other. Much has been said about the inadequacies of the Arabic public sphere and its structural weaknesses, and there still remains a lot to be said about the potential of transnational public spheres in facilitating discourse, providing platforms for opposing views and allowing greater space for political dissonance on air. However, such talk has not engaged with or produced much in terms of empirical contributions. I hope that the summary of literature in the field, provided in Chapter V, will make this empirical-dearth visible. The implication of the empirical vacuum is that we have little insight into the ways in which public spheres ‘actually’ manifest or are perceived to do so (whether openly or illusively) in Arabic societies.
This brings us to the second weakness affecting the development of a sound theory of the Arabic public sphere. Debates thus far have been confined to discussions of the mediated public sphere of transnational news networks, understood as platforms where political publics participate and contest their positions. In this vein, studies of the Arabic public sphere have been too dependent on a Habermasean emphasis with “official” and “political” publics, and too constricted in searching for “rational and “deliberative” arguments and the ways in which they are “consequential” in Arab states. Little engagement is found with critiques of the Habermasean narrative, especially feminist critiques which account for the ways in which publics do participate in their societies, even when excluded from “official publicness”. Geoff Eley’s work on plebeian public spheres (1987) and Mary Ryan’s thesis outlining how US women effectively found ways of making inroads into male-dominated political publics (1990) are both drawn on by Nancy Fraser to produce a theory of subaltern counterpublics (1992) which outlines the processes of contestation and negotiation through which counterpublics acquire influence in public spheres. This entails, firstly, thinking of the public sphere as “multiple” realms and, implicitly, accepting the myriad forms of engagement and persuasion ‘public-sphering’ assumes. Secondly, it recognises the importance of exploring the ways in which public spheres exist and continue to negotiate stratification within societies. ‘Public spher ing’ in this light may vary from the weak to the strong.

Thirdly, acknowledging the plurality of public spheres and the diversity of the forms of ‘public-sphering’ extends to an endorsement of how public spheres exist beyond the strictly political. No study of note has considered the Arabic public sphere as a wholesome theory that spans (and perhaps cuts across) the political as well the cultural, the public and the private. To Habermas, the practice of criticism originated in the literary sphere of art appreciation and letter writing. Particularly in the case of women, excluded from the political public sphere of coffee-houses, Mary Ryan (1990) and Jane Rendall (1999) both demonstrate how the alternative publics formed by those marginalised women emerged first within the cultural realms of society, and later effectively expanded into and informed the discussion of political issues. In Ryan’s study, the philanthropic motifs of female groups in seventeenth century North America offered the rationale for their gathering, and produced many discussions about issues affecting their lives as well as their increasing social involvement (cited in Fraser 1990: 61). Rendall similarly demonstrates that whilst women were marginalised in the official public sphere of politics, they found their voice, sometimes disguised as fiction, in the literary public sphere in poetry, prose and history. To Rendall, the early works of European feminists were to inform later debates
about women’s right to work and own property (1999:481). In this light, if we are to conceive of the Arabic public sphere as multiple (rather than a singular political sphere, as the second argument made above attempts to do) then we need to look at the different ways in which “paths to publicness” are constructed within public spheres, the mediated as well as the occasional and the everyday within civil society. This is particularly important if we are to consider how exclusions are contested in the Arabic public sphere, a region associated globally with the “subjugation” and “oppression” of women. There is a need to understand who is included in the Arabic public sphere and who is excluded, and then to uncover how the excluded construct paths that defy their marginalisation. This needs to be explored empirically; only then can we theorise how Arabic publics go about the process of ‘public sphering’.

The above three arguments offer the framework that guides and informs the intellectual trajectory of this study, and it is this trajectory that is discussed, or rather, argued for in Chapter I. Chapter I therefore begins with a discussion of normative public sphere theories and aims to contextualise discussions on the Arabic public sphere within universal theories in the field. Habermas’s original thesis specified a blueprint of the structures (socio-economic) and resulting practices (rational-critical deliberation) of what he called the bourgeois public sphere. However, feminist critiques of Habermas’s work, most notably Fraser’s arguments, insisted that Habermas’s blueprint presupposes the bourgeois as THE public and their coffee-house meetings as THE public sphere (both in the singular). To Fraser, such a position ignores the ways in which other excluded publics, such as women, found ways of participating in and forming alternative paths to the male dominated political sphere. Fraser argues that this is in fact a more plausible conceptualisation of public spheres within non-egalitarian and stratified societies, meaning that power and persuasion remain discriminating factors more consequential than deliberation.

Building Fraser’s arguments into a conceptualisation of the Arabic public sphere allows the recognition of the ways in which public spheres are manifest in non-democratic contexts, like those of the Arab world. The chapter then considers what criteria are thus relevant for conceiving of the Arabic public sphere, and discusses two such criteria that emerge from universal discussions of the theory of the public sphere: autonomy and consequentiality. Both are found problematic in their ‘strict’ application to the Arab world; the first because ‘the autonomy of a public sphere’ as a distinct space between the private and the state assumes a linear relationship, extending from home to administration, that does not account for the many social networks to which Arab citizens ascribe. Beyond the home and the state, those include
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Religious authority, kin and familial relations as well as tribal authority. None exist on their own, and they all bear influence on each other. Consequently, an Arabic public sphere, or rather spheres, need to be understood as ‘niches’ between and within these publics. This may entail recognising that an ‘autonomous’ public sphere is weak or quasi, but it also allows us to recognise how the multiple spaces allow publics to draw on different influences and identities when negotiating or contesting ‘authority’. Especially in the case of Arab women, this has been referred to as the capacity to provide “multiple critiques”.

The second criterion discussed is that of consequentiality, and specifically, the agency of public opinion in affecting state policy. Both Habermas and his critics, including Nancy Fraser, insist that this criterion gives the public sphere its ‘edge’ – without agency or the capacity to bear influence, the public sphere loses its critical capacity as a communicative theory. This is one of the most vocal critiques cited against the Arabic public sphere: the lack of democratic structures in the Arab world means that public opinion remains inconsequential. However, Marc Lynch (2003) has insisted on the need to conceive of the Arabic public sphere as a forum for public argument, rather than the narrower definition of public opinion. Lynch goes on to argue, as will be elaborated in Chapter I, that public argument does at times effectively translate into pressure on government policies and in fact provides the “environment” in which states govern. Thus, even when it lacks continuous ‘consequentiality’ ‘public spherings’ continues to bear influence and merit. This approach to the public sphere is also seen to complement studies on political change in the Arab world (Wickham 1994) and civil society in the region (Pratt 2007) which reject the ‘linear’ Western model of democratization and its application to the Arab world, instead arguing for the ways in which change happens, politically and socially, at the level of the polity even without “obvious” change in the larger political structures governing Arab publics.

This is the first argument made in Chapter I; the second argument is that this rationale also allows us to explore where and to what extent Arabic public spheres operate as sites of exclusivity, and how this differs across the political and cultural realms of publicness. A discussion of gender and the public sphere is provided to this end, with an emphasis on the ways in which participation in a cultural public sphere historically preceded engagement with and inclusion into the political arena. Implicitly, Chapter I recognises the value of incorporating an understanding of citizens as publics into arguments of the Arabic public sphere. If we are to understand the ways in which public spheres are manifest even in the absence of structural and
institutional safeguards that protect the functions of the public sphere, then the ‘publicness’ in question is the sum total of the ways in which citizens actually experience and embody their citizenship.

Therefore, the aims of this thesis are to build on these critiques and contribute to the development of a theory of the Arabic public sphere that empirically accounts for the ways in which citizens do actually participate, and that also explores the different forms their participation assumes in the political and cultural realms of public spaces. In expanding beyond the mediated realm of transnational news, the thesis also seeks to understand how participation varies across gender and whether marked differences exist in the ways women engage in the political and cultural public spheres. The only remaining question was how to go about doing so.

In the early months of 2007 the Jordanian government announced that, in response to a request by His Majesty King Abdullah II, parliamentary elections were going to be held across the country the coming November. Those elections became the basis of this thesis and provided the context, or case study, upon which an empirical exploration of the public sphere could be developed. Exploring the Arabic public sphere through a domestic issue closely related to political reform was also suitable because criticisms have been voiced over the tendency of Arabic-language transnational media to sidetrack attention from local issues by focusing on the regional conflicts (Palestine and Iraq). The first case study of the thesis, therefore, aimed to investigate the news coverage of the Jordanian elections across a number of transnational broadcasters, with particular attention paid to the portrayal of citizens and the roles they were afforded in the coverage.

In the process of researching local reactions to the announcement of the elections I learnt that a performing arts centre in Amman, Jordan where I used to attend drama and ballet lessons as a student was developing a number of interactive theatre performances about the elections. Interactive theatre is a medium associated with drama for development, and it is designed to elicit participation and engagement with the audience in such a manner that it allows them to think innovatively about the issues that affect their lives, encouraging them to adopt changes that help transform their situations. I called the director of the centre and enquired whether I would be allowed to accompany the troupe on their performances for the purposes of research and video record the ways in which Jordanian audiences participated in
and engaged with the actors. Ms. Lina al-Tal, the centre’s director, readily approved. Those plays, which were performed across Jordan (in community centres, university campuses, and sports stadiums, and attracted citizens young and old, literate and illiterate, urbanised and Bedouin) form the basis of the second case study.

The thesis, then, explores the manifestations of the Arabic public sphere in an abstract-political setting (transnational television) as well as through an occasional-cultural medium (interactive theatre). For means of comparison, both case studies are concerned with the Jordanian parliamentary elections of November 2007, and as such, Chapter II attempts to provide context and background by highlighting events and issues of public concern in Jordanian history. This is largely a historical exercise (and of course, an incomplete one), but the aim is twofold. Firstly, to provide context and contribute to the creation of a more historically informed conceptualisation of the Arabic public sphere, a process that remains marginalised and ignored, as the examples cited in the beginning (Souk Ukaz and the Majlis) sought to illustrate. Secondly, while the historical narrative is largely one of ‘events’ in Jordanian history (the absence of resources make it impossible to provide a history of ‘publicness’ in Jordan at this point in time) the aim is to provide insight into how understandings of Jordanian statehood, identity and publicness are in fact fluid and adaptable concepts, that did change and were negotiated (and continue to be renegotiated) as a result of domestic, regional and international issues. This is followed by a discussion of the Jordanian public sphere à la Marc Lynch’s study in the field (1999). Lynch’s thesis, as the chapter will note, is concerned with explaining state behaviour post-1988 with reference to public sphere theory. The argument posits that the debates in the Jordanian public spheres, particularly surrounding national identity and the formation of consensus in this regard, best explain the behaviour of the state in relation to the severing of the ties with the West Bank (1988), the position of the country during the first Gulf war (1991) as well as the signing of its peace treaty with Israel (1994). The ‘openness’ and the ‘closure’ of the public sphere by state authorities coincided with reaching consensus on issues of national interest in the first two instances and creating polarization and furthering instability in the latter case. An account of the parliamentary elections of November 2007 and the issues surrounding the elections is provided in the second half of Chapter V.

Chapter III offers a methodological discussion of the first case study: an examination of the news coverage of the Jordanian elections across transnational media. In order to examine the “publicness” of transnational news media, the case study considers the portrayal and
representation of Jordanian citizens in the evening bulletins of four transnational broadcasters (chosen to represent the myriad political influences in the region). They include the government owned Jordan Television (JTV, recently rebranded al-Urduniya), the regionally popular al-Jazeera, its main competitor al-Arabiya and the US funded al-Hurra. The news channels were monitored over a month’s duration, beginning two weeks prior to the elections and ending two weeks after the elections. The participation of Jordanian citizens in the news bulletins of the four broadcasters through vox-pops was transcribed and coded, then thematically grouped to reveal the different modes of citizen participation portrayed in the news. This uncovers the roles allocated citizens in the news, and they were found to range from the comment-driven to the policy-oriented. The different modes of participation were then developed into a Continuum of Participation and SPSS was used to produce patterns, visual and statistical, that delineate the ways in which citizens are portrayed as participating across the transnational media. The value of content analysis as a research tool in this regard is also discussed for its capacity to reveal trends that inform our understanding of the roles allocated publics on the news, allowing us to draw conclusions about the “publicness” of transnational broadcasters.

The results and discussion of this case study is provided in Chapter VI. Two main findings emerge from the chapter: firstly, the transnational media afforded Jordanian citizens limited spaces to engage and participate as deliberative publics. Instead, their allocated roles depicted them as ‘observers’ of the electoral process or, at best, ‘commentators’ on various issues related to the elections. Even while JTV afforded citizens significant presence in the elections (this was unmatched by the other three broadcasters), Jordanians were still denied meaningful forms of access: very few citizens were portrayed as deliberators who were critical-rational in their views nor as active citizens in proposing alternatives. The only marked difference in the portrayal of citizens between the government managed JTV and the transnational news networks (al-Jazeera, al-Arabiya and al-Hurra) was that the latter networks did not portray any citizens ‘repeating official narratives’ (whilst JTV did).

The second finding to emerge out of the first case study is the gendering of the mediated public sphere. As noted, citizens were largely afforded roles as ‘observers’ of the political process or ‘commentators’ on its happenings. When these findings are further explored with regard to gender, a significant divide emerges, both quantitative and qualitative. To elaborate, female citizens were underrepresented in the news, and this was true across the four transnational broadcasters. In addition, whilst male citizens were portrayed as ‘observers’ and
‘commentators’, female citizens were less likely to be portrayed ‘commenting on issues’ and much more likely to be portrayed ‘engaging emotionally’. This raises interesting questions as to the capacity of the medium to bypass patriarchal understandings of gender roles in the same manner it, presumably, bypasses national boundaries and controls. The second question this finding raises is whether this marginalisation of women vis-à-vis the transnational media is representative of the ways they participate in civil society, or whether the cultural public sphere affords them spaces to engage and contest these dominant understandings of power (similar to the ways in which the private/literary afforded European and American women the capacity to construct alternative paths to publicness).

This is where, perhaps, the most significant contribution of this thesis resides, in its comparative pursuit. The second case study of the thesis goes on to explore the ways in which Jordanian citizens participated in interactive theatre performances about the November parliamentary elections. Chapter IV offers an overview of the methodological approaches employed in this second case study. The chapter begins by presenting a literature review of performative ethnography as a social science research method that seeks to explore the value of ‘performance’ in its various forms in studies of society. The chapter then discusses the corresponding emergent interest in theatrical studies to account for the ‘social’ element of performance. After this literary introduction, the chapter outlines, in considerable detail, the interactive performances attended and video-recorded for this thesis. Two interactive performances were developed and performed by the interactive theatre troupe of the Performing Arts Centre (PAC) of Jordan, and they both revolved around issues surrounding the elections, including tribalism, gender, youth and political participation. The interactive performances were devised specifically with the purpose of eliciting audience responses through debate and discussion in one part as well as role playing, as citizens in a town hall meeting, in the other part. Thus, the performances allowed for the experiential dimension of participating in a public sphere to be embodied and ‘practiced’ and those forms of participation were similarly coded and thematically grouped to develop a Continuum of Engagement. SPSS was also used to understand and visually illustrate patterns of participation within this cultural, and occasional, sphere to allow for comparison with the first case study.

Chapter VII attempts to contextualise participation in the medium of theatre in the region and for this purpose provides a historical account of Arabic dramatic traditions and their centrality as a forum for socio-political participation within Arab societies. The chapter explains
that unlike European dramatic conventions which grew out of Greek mythology and culminated in the development of the theatre as a physical space, the sites of Arabic drama varied from town centres to Bedouin tents, and later included cabaret style coffee-house enactments that remained participatory and open to audience intervention. Audiences were encouraged, even expected, to actively engage with characters in conversation, offer ‘ideas’ for improvisation, and sometimes even join actors on stage and participate themselves. Beginning with the early days of transnational *hakawatis* [roaming storytellers], Arabic drama continues to be influenced by satirical parodies that feature wise-fool characters and the injustices they face in their everyday lives. This historical account provides the context necessary to understand how Jordanian audiences participated in the interactive theatre performances surrounding the parliamentary elections. While theatre in Habermas’s account constitutes an “occasional” public sphere (1996: 374 cited in Pearson and Messeger Davies 2005: 139), its centrality as a forum of participation in the Arab context deems its ‘public spher ing’ capacity organic and natural.

Following this introduction to the medium, Chapter VIII outlines and discusses the results of the second case study. Notably, the chapter finds that within the cultural public sphere, citizens engaged in more diverse forms, ranging from ‘citizens expressing traditional narratives’ and ‘citizens expressing fatalistic attitudes’ all the way through to ‘citizens negotiating change’ and ‘citizens expressing universal attitudes’. The study also found that far from ‘abstract’ debate about public issues, participants in the performances often expressed issues of concern emotively by referring to their everyday lives and difficulties. The inability of the government to create enough jobs for young Jordanians, for example was often framed in terms of ‘pain’ and ‘betrayal’ by parents who described the sacrifices they willingly committed to for the sake of their children’s education, in order to secure them better futures, only to find that they are unable to find work or build their lives upon graduation. Persuasion, rather than rationality, appears a more applicable description of the ways in which Jordanian publics do actually participate.

The second study also finds that female citizens participated in more meaningful roles within the cultural public sphere than was afforded them in the news coverage of the elections. Female participants were more likely to ‘express universal attitudes’ and to ‘negotiate change’, both of them modes of engagement that show active contestation with dominant social, cultural and political norms. The category ‘citizens negotiating change’ was found to be particularly interesting, because it shows how participants, rather than reject tradition outright, went about
reclaiming it' or redefining its meanings. For example, women (as well as a few men) used personal stories (of husbands and fathers supporting women) as well as historical narratives (of famous Arab women) and religious teachings (such as the sayings of Prophet Muhammad or verses from the Qur’an) to ‘anchor’ change within their societies, possibly dismissing its perception as a ‘Western’ norm that threatens local culture. In addition, differences in modes of engagement across gender were found to be positively decreasing with successive generations; differences in participation among seniors was most pronounced, less so in the case of ≈30-60s and nearly identical in the case of ≈14-30s. However, both males and females in the youngest age group engaged with lower modes of participation than their parent’s generation.

It is within the comparative dimension of the mediated-political and interactive-cultural spaces that the argument for reframing debates on the Arabic public sphere resides. This expansive and more inclusive understanding of the Arabic public sphere, as I hope this thesis will demonstrate, allows us to account for the ways in which negotiation and contestation are constitutive to public spheres as processes that are continuously renewed and developed. This has been the ‘project’ undertaken by this thesis, and also its contribution to the field. This approach to the Arabic public sphere advocates, even necessities, a change of course; it highlights a necessity to look beyond transnational news media in search of an Arabic public sphere and instead invites us to re-engage with Arab citizens, to document their experiences, their challenges, and their hopes. It encourages us to actively search for alternative forms of expression, in both the political as well as the cultural public spheres, and to empirically investigate and analyse what we find. It is my hope that this thesis does so in an original and creative manner.
Literature Review
Chapter I: The Public Sphere - a synthesis of the normative and the real, the universal and the particular

Jürgen Habermas’s *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* is an account of an epochal mode of citizenship that developed in the seventeenth century in the coffee houses of Western Europe and which, at its peak, saw private persons come together to subject government policy to rational deliberation. Habermas described this emerging space as operating somewhere between the state and society and embodying two forms, a literary public sphere and a political public sphere. The first was linked to letters and an appreciation (and inherently critique) of the arts, whilst the latter manifested in coffee house discussions where ‘something approaching public opinion’ was formed. The public sphere, both in its literary and political forms, was linked to an emerging bourgeois class during early industrial capitalism.

In his book, which received more widespread recognition after its translation into English in 1989, Habermas describes how this new emerging class (the bourgeoisie) successfully bracketed social inequalities and went about deliberating in a rational-critical manner, eschewing personal material gain and focussing instead on issues pertaining to the common good. However, this romanticised period of citizenship and engagement, to Habermas, gave way to the ‘refeudalization’ of the public sphere as a result of the commercialisation of the press; advertising spaces in daily papers became a commodity and the editorial section assumed a marketing role, effectively transforming the press into “the gate through which privileged private interests invaded the public sphere” (Habermas 1989: 185). Publicity becomes a manufactured representation of private interest, replacing its original definition as a public tool used to expose political domination. As public authority itself is left with no choice but to compete for publicity, the state begins to address its citizens as consumers at the same time as private enterprises “evoke in their customers the idea that in their consumption decisions they act in their capacity as citizens” (Habermas 1989: 195).

This conceptualisation of the bourgeois public sphere was soon challenged. Revisionist historiography revealed how the public sphere was not as inclusive and accessible as Habermas outlined; in fact, it actively excluded participation on the basis of gender (Joan Landes 1998) and class (Negt and Kluge 1972). It has further been argued that the primary reason for the coffee house gatherings was not altruistic deliberation about the common good, but rather,
opportunities for personal material gain (*ibid.*). As such, the emerging bourgeoisie were interested in displacing the existing aristocratic elite, and were using the space to ascertain their fitness to govern (Geoff Eley 1987).

Nancy Fraser (1990) also critiqued Habermas’s account of a single, overarching public sphere, and its claim to be “...the public arena in the singular” (1990: 66). By rejecting the notion of a public sphere as an epochal transformation that ‘rose’ then ‘declined’ between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Fraser advances a conceptualisation of competing subaltern counter publics where ideas are contested and the interplay of power manifests itself. She notes that Habermas only accepted the development of other publics at a later stage, “to be read under the sign of fragmentation and decline” (*ibid*.,) and argues that a single overarching public sphere, as idealised by Habermas, is historically inaccurate as well as an undesirable feature of the public sphere. To advance her argument, Fraser first cites the work of Mary Ryan on the political activism of nineteenth century North American women. Although legally excluded from the official public sphere, Ryan shows that they successfully formed alternative routes to access public life, often forming alternative public arenas in the process. Fraser also notes that the relationship between competing publics is based on a process of contestation, not deliberation. Since rational deliberation and debate are bourgeoisie social conventions other groups feel “less at home in these practices, putting them at a disadvantage in such situations” (Butsch 2009: 5). Not only is bracketing of inequalities unachievable, Fraser argues, but the account of such practices in Habermas’s narrative masks the ways in which inequality persists in everyday life. Therefore, the notion of publicity embedded in the Habermasean public sphere “accepts at face value the bourgeois public’s claim to be the public” (Fraser 1990: 61) and this “gives the impression of universality where it does not exist...merely mask[ing] the actual operation of inequality” (Butsch 2009: 5).

Fraser also argues that a plurality of competing publics better approximates the ideal of participatory parity than a singular official public sphere. Based on the US feminist challenge to the male dominated public sphere, Fraser advances a conceptualisation of what she calls ‘subaltern counter-publics’ as

“parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and articulate counter discourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs” (1990: 67).
Fraser continues to explain that the significance of subaltern counterpublics is twofold: they function as spaces for withdrawal and regroupment for subordinate groups, and they double as a ‘training ground’ for developing arguments and strategies to be employed in the processes of contestation with wider publics. It is in this dialectical function that the ‘emancipatory’ power of subaltern counterpublics resides (ibid. 68). These discursive alternative arenas are thus identity-based groups that diverge from Habermas’s rational-deliberative public sphere. Rather than abstract deliberation, Fraser insists on contestation between competing publics, and their personalization of the political as a means of pursuing symbolic recognition.

John Thompson summarises these critiques of Habermas’s original thesis along four lines: firstly, he notes that Habermas ignored the ways in which non-bourgeois publics participated in shaping public debate (including the ‘plebeian public sphere’); secondly, Habermas failed to fully account for the gendering of the public sphere; thirdly, his pessimistic conclusion of the decline of the public sphere fails to realise the ways in which mass media continue to (potentially) allow for the discussion and negotiation of issues pertaining to the common good; and finally, for his vagueness and contradictions relating to the place of rational-critical deliberation in democratic states (1993 cited in McGuigan 1996: 27). Like most of Habermas’s critics, Thompson remains committed to the normative values of the theory of the public sphere and their contribution to informing democratic theory and practice more generally (ibid.).

It is worth noting that Habermas did recognise the limitations of his original concept of the public sphere, and he later returned to provide a more optimistic reading of the functioning of public spheres vis-à-vis the mass media. In fact, White argues that Habermas’s “growing pessimism and the totalization of his critique of Western modernity constituted something of a failure of nerve” when considered alongside the breadth of his works and their inherent resistance to the intellectual trajectories (and fatalism) that dominated the works of Adorno and Horkheimer post-WWII (1995: 5). Habermas would retain the spirit of the Frankfurt school’s pre-war years as he set himself the task of developing a more comprehensive conceptualisation of reason, a pursuit that culminated in his theory of communicative action. Whilst arguing that a communicative approach to reason and action offers a means of critiquing modernity, Habermas’s work once again drew criticism from poststructuralists, postmodernists and feminists who argued that his reading of Western modernity as the closest embodiment of
universal values and ideals neglects to account for the ways in which modern Western societies marginalise ‘others’ who do not, or cannot, conform to ideals of ‘reason’ (ibid.9).

In *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy* Habermas offers a discursive theory of democracy that is, in many ways, radically different to the organized state he outlines in *The Theory of Communicative Action*. He affirms the role of lifeworld actors in articulating their needs as a means of translating communicative power into administrative power, feeding into a “continual and variegated “interplay” between a multiplicity of “public spheres” emerging across civil society and a broad spectrum of formal political institutions” (ibid.12-13). He also recognises the role of non-governmental and voluntary associations and ways in which (‘under certain circumstances’) they acquire influence in the public sphere (Ayish 2008: 43).

The Habermasean public sphere today is recognised as a normative ideal upon which the relationship between contemporary media and the engagement of publics can be examined. While the original [and historically romanticised] theory of the public sphere was concerned with bourgeois [male] publics deliberating over political and ideological issues, the public sphere is today understood as a multiplicity of spheres, publics, actors, and media platforms. The evolving picture is one in which “The public sphere emerges from a view of politics as a process of dialogue, and is meant to describe a platform for negotiating and reconciling competing interests” (Higgins 2008: 27).

### Between the particular and the universal

The public sphere is increasingly informing understandings of mediated publics and their relationship to public engagement both in the European context and, increasingly, in the case of transnational news media in the Arab world. But Habermas’s original theory rested on rather particular bearings; its setting within the rise of early industrial capitalism in Western European capitals and the emergence of a bourgeois class who were increasingly interested, and capable, of coming together and discussing their affairs in order to exert influence, in the form of public opinion, on the state. Public discussion, in this account, was the product of specific historical events and social institutions. The first point that needs addressing is therefore the ‘universality’ of the concept itself, and second of all, if we are to apply it to non-European
contexts, such as the Arab world where the same historical ‘bearings’ do not apply, what criteria must we consider?

Edgar argues that Habermas’s bourgeois public sphere is meant to be interpreted not as a historical narrative but as an idea with direct relevance to contemporary politics (2004: 31). Indeed, Habermas’s later revisions, including his acknowledgment of how interest groups and alternative media platforms can came to ‘bear influence’ on the public sphere “under certain circumstances” confirms this contemporary relevance, as do Fraser’s arguments of subaltern counterpublics and Peter Dahlgren’s writings on the relationship between media forms and public engagement in the public sphere. While Habermas’s historical narrative has been widely contested and critiqued, its normative value continues to influence how media platforms are perceived in their role as mediators of publicness.

A related matter concerns the specificity of Habermas’s works to Western European contexts, and their reliance on Western philosophical ideals (Kant). Pensky argues that the particular German context of Habermas’s theories “work[s] against the Germanness of the political culture of the Federal Republic” thus “impel[ing] Habermas’s thought towards a thoroughgoing political universalism” (1995: 69). In this sense, rather than conceive of universalism as a political value or an abstract moral-political principle, it is understood as embodied in particular cultural and political situations where “…a collectively shared mentality; a sense of solidarity inhibiting a public space that is distinct from political or economic institutions” (Pensky 1995:70).

This raises the matter of the public sphere as ‘distinct’ from official state institutions. Habermas’s original narrative cited three institutional criteria that organised the political and literary public spheres in seventeenth and eighteenth century Western Europe: equality (private citizens meeting to deliberate on an equal footing regardless of rank or status); openness (private citizens discussing previously taboo issues and/or loosening the Church’s monopoly on interpretation - especially of art - and its representational value); and inclusivity (anyone in principle could partake in the public sphere) (Habermas 1989: 73). As has been noted, many of these criteria were questioned and critiqued on historical grounds, and even whilst they are retained for normative purposes, they have been accused of masking the ways in which inequalities persist even within societies that proclaim universal values.
Yet, two criteria implicitly emerge within readings of Habermas and his critics; they relate to the autonomy of the public sphere (as a place situated between the private and the public and independent of state institutions) as well as the potency and agency of public opinion as developed from within the autonomous public sphere. In *The Public Sphere: An Encyclopaedia Article* Habermas explains that,

“Citizens behave as a public body when they confer in an unrestricted fashion – that is, with the guarantee of freedom of assembly and association and the freedom to express and publish their opinions – about matters of general interest.” (1974: 49).

In addition, and “[a]lthough state authority is so to speak the executor of the political public sphere, it is not a part of it” (*ibid.*).

Both these criteria are problematic in their application to the context of the Arab world where freedom of assembly and speech are not guaranteed, and where separation between state and civil society, while varying from one country to the other, still falls short of allowing for autonomous and distinct sites for public debate. Therefore, before we can speak of an Arabic public sphere(s), the criteria of autonomy and agency need to be discussed and synthesised in more detail.

In Habermas’s narrative the emergence of the deliberative bourgeois class was associated with the expansion of trade beyond the limits of a particular town governed by a feudal lord. As the new bourgeoisie’s economic interests transcended particular locations, this entailed the development of a central administration that collected taxes and guaranteed legal and financial regulation to lower risks associated with entrepreneurship (Habermas 1989: 14-22). Habermas also notes that the bourgeoisie were a reading public from the outset and the “real carrier of the public”, although their rise witnessed the downward mobility of the “burghers” (craftsmen and shop people) who became less influential as town-based relations gave way to national oriented rights. Yet, the new bourgeoisie, made up of merchants, bankers, manufacturers and entrepreneurs, exerted their influence in a new sphere of civil society rather than integrate into the “noble” culture of the established court (*ibid.*24). A related shift occurred in the ‘private’ realm of the family; principally the central unit of economic production and a space to which the feudal lord’s power extended, industrial capitalism reclassified the realm of the family as intimate and private. Economic production, now of interest to the entire population, is transferred into an autonomous realm that is subject to state regulation and, in
the case of joint stock companies, requires collective funding. Thus, where feudalism subjected
people to the power of the state, capitalism produced publics who conceived of themselves as
opposed to the state. The people are therefore more private, in the sense that their homes and
intimate lives enjoy autonomy from the state, but their everyday lives, particularly their
economic activities, are increasingly subject to government administration. This intricate
interplay of public and private, court and town, facilitated the conditions for citizens to subject
their state to rational-deliberative critique. In Edgar’s words,

“Between the public and the private realm lies the town, which displaces the court as
the principle context of economic, cultural and political life, and thus becomes the
context of the public sphere itself” (Edgar 2004: 32).

This criterion of autonomy, as a space between the private and the public, is central to
the normative account of the public sphere, yet it is not equivalent nor similar to understandings
of space, both public and private, in the context of the Arab world. In fact, notions of space in
the Arab world are difficult to synthesise, because of an intertwined symbiosis, between religion
(largely Islam), the state (authoritarian and in many cases rentier states that control and drive
the economy) and cultural influences (most notably, at least in the case of Jordan,
tribal/Bedouin culture).

To practicing Muslims, Islam is a comprehensive way of life that encompasses ‘private’
activities such as eating, drinking, socialising and even speech itself. Everything is considered an
act of worship, and everyday behaviour therefore assumes a religious connotation. Still, Ayish
(2008) argues that the moral values advocated by the Islamic faith are compatible with those
associated with a normative concept of the public sphere. Ayish outlines some of the ways in
which Islam introduced cultural values central to the concept of the public sphere into its
communities; for example, the transformation of rival Arabian tribes, frequently involved in
fighting each other, and merging them into a more inclusive Umma (Community or Nation)
(2008: 59); therefore, where ‘blood’ and kin relations used to bind Bedouin loyalties, the Umma
instead instilled concepts of communal solidarity (it became custom for members of the Umma
to address each other as ‘brother’ and ‘sister’; this practice continues today amongst the
religiously inclined). Also, the role of the Khalifa (Caliph) in establishing justice, mercy,
community cohesion and equality parallels notions of the common good central to normative
ideals of the public sphere. Additional normative Islamic concepts of knowledge and
Chapter I: The Public Sphere

responsibility reinforce participation in serving the community, and encourage diversity within unity. Finally, the role of Shura (consultation) allows for deliberation on matters of concern to society which are not addressed by the Qur’an and Sunna, and is further conductive to Islam’s affinity with the institution of a sound public sphere (Ayish 2008: 59-78).

However, Arabic states today are not Islamic in the sense that the ruler himself does not (and cannot) exert any religious influence on his public (as would have been the case during the Islamic Caliphates), but many still derive ‘legitimacy’ from religious credentials. The Hashemite rulers of Jordan, for example, trace their lineage directly to Prophet Muhammad through his daughter Fatima. Thus, “Classical Arabic has produced no term which is exactly synonymous with the word secularism, or which denotes a distinction between the sacred and the profane” (Ayish 2008: 79). To Lynch, statehood and associated understandings of the ‘space’ of public spheres in the Arab world should not be understood with a strict application of the Habermasean system/lifeworld dichotomy, but rather as a process of identifying public spheres in international contexts that inform our understanding of how institutional forms facilitate communicative action (1999: 37). Unlike other parts of the world, struggles of transnational nationalism (qawmiya) and local state nationalism (wataniya) intersect significantly, and bear influence on both transnational and domestic public spheres (ibid. 5). Every Arab state finds it must justify itself before a domestic public as well as a wider transnational public, to the extent that the “production” of consensus (and its manipulation) have constituted a strategic ‘power house’ within the Arab order (ibid.). Thus,

“There are always multiple public spheres, both within and outside of the state and the balance among these public spheres varies. The Arabist public sphere demonstrates that there is no necessary correlation between state boundaries and the place of the public sphere. The creation of a state-bounded public sphere is a political process with important behavioural implications.” (Lynch 1999: 268).

In addition, the concept of space in Bedouin culture, according to al-Mahadin (2007), is derived from the fluidity of nomadic life; as such, it is incorporated under a Bedouin’s own skin, becoming an “extention, a prosthesis” that accompanies, rather than interrupts, his movement (Palumbo 2007 cited in al-Mahadin 2007: 91). To Cribb, this also means that space in Bedouin culture is less about establishing connections between a community and a locale, and more intertwined with the struggles of survival and the acquisition of pasture (2004 cited in al-
Mahadin 2007: 91); but Abu-Lughod understands this to mean that space in Bedouin culture is defined not by physical parameters, but by a sense of belonging, which forms the key stone of Bedouin identity because “there is no life outside the group, no alternative social groups other than the community” (2000 cited in al-Mahadin 2007: 92). Thus, belonging is differentiated from any notion of space.

Abu-Lughod’s arguments are more convincing in light of such notions of space persisting even after modern-day Bedouins have ceased to be involved in herding or other forms of nomadic life (except symbolically as a means of maintaining tradition). As Chapter II outlines, Bedouin tribes in Jordan are increasingly involved in state institutions, particularly in defence (the army) and politics (ministerial and cabinet postings). Nonetheless, many Bedouin families, such as the Abbadi’s whom Linda Layne stayed with for a year as part of her research project, still spend six months (the warmer half of the year) living in beit sha’er [literary: house of wool, the name by which Bedouins call their tents] and the other six months living in a house. However, the house and the beit sha’er share the same layout, and as Layne notes, the female quarters in both are referred to as “at the girls” rather than the “girls’ room”, indicating how space is still defined by the community who occupy it and not by physical bearings (1994 cited in al-Mahadin 2007: 91-92).

However, this understanding of space further problematises notions of private and public that underpin the normative theory of the public sphere. As Hitti argues, the deeply ingrained trait of individualism in the Bedouin identity means that ideas of devotion to a common good beyond that of the tribe are inexistent. He defines ‘aṣabīyah as the spirit of the tribe and its perception of itself as a self-sufficient and absolute unit which enjoys unconditional loyalty from all its members. This sense of solidarity does not exist beyond one’s tribe to include other Bedouin tribes (Hitti 1970:24-28). This means that, on the one hand, the Bedouin is a “born democrat” who “meets his sheikh on an equal footing”; on the other, he is an “aristocrat” with a strong sense of pride and belief in the nobility of his lineage and lifestyle (ibid. 28).

As noted, these sometimes contradicting influences make it difficult to conceptualise notions of space in Arab-Islamic societies, and indeed these different influences manifest differently across communities within the same country. For example, in a country like Jordan, Islamic ideology (though not necessarily Islam’s normative values) are more visible in the city of Zarqa whilst tribal identities remain stronger in areas where Bedouin attributes are still upheld,
like the town of Mafraq. This means that while ‘autonomy’ from the state is absent, the private and the public are also intertwined within other societal fabrics that mitigate against ‘autonomy’. These include, as has been pointed to, religious beliefs that transcend the scope of the spiritual as well as community traditions based on loyalty to kin and not to physical space.

In order to synthesise such differences, and instead of conceiving the public sphere as situated between the public and the private, Ayish advances a conceptualisation of an Islamic sphere of communication that mediates between 3 spaces: the transcendental sphere (relating to the direct relationship between a person and his Creator), a public sphere (which facilitates communication between community members on the one hand and between them and a central state on the other) and a private sphere (covers the intimate relations of the family) (2008: 79). Ayish’s thesis aims to evolve understandings of “…both Arab-Islamic morality and global political realities as two mutually-inclusive intellectual domains” (2008: 11). He maintains that the concept of the public sphere is relevant to contemporary Arab societies, but asserts the need to “define conditions for enhancing its standing in an Arab cultural and political context” (ibid. 14). The basis of Ayish’s intellectual synthesis is that,

“Islam, by default” promotes a public sphere-oriented congregational life-style whether in spiritual rituals or temporal social and political activities despite misunderstandings of its obsessive private sphere prescriptions relating to women and the family” (ibid.).

Ayish’s thesis is concerned with the compatibility of Islamic faith with the concept of the public sphere; his attempt at reconciliation contributes to a normative conceptualisation of what an Arab-Islamic public sphere could constitute. In so doing, Ayish successfully contextualises and localises the applicability of the public sphere concept to the Arab region, and he contributes to the universality, and versatility, of the concept. However, his approach remains within the tradition of conceptualising public spheres as emerging, rather than existing spaces. He himself admits that in a region where local democratic arrangements are absent, the public sphere is more a response to global political and technological developments rather than an inclusive platform within societies. He explains that “The missing indigenous variable will always make the promised difference in either stifling or empowering the institution of a sound public sphere in the region” (Ayish 2008: 24).
This raises a second criterion of the normative Habermasean public sphere: ‘agency’ - the capacity of citizens to influence public policy through the development of consensus-based public opinion. The normative conceptualisation of the public sphere rests on an Enlightenment liberal-philosophical perspective that implicitly assumes institutionalized constitutional orders which guarantee basic rights of free speech, assembly, independent press and participation in political debate and decision-making (Ayish 2008: 37). To Habermas, this was most developed in the British bourgeois public sphere, followed by the French and finally imported to Germany. He cites Bentham’s description of an imperfect but increasingly tolerated “regime of publicity” (Habermas 1989: 101) before which, according to Bergasse, “all authorities become silent, all prejudices disappear, all particular interests are effaced” (ibid. 99). This idealised conception of public opinion, then, became a central component of a normative public sphere as it emerged alongside a constitutional state based on notions of civil rights. In 1852, Guizot describes this new system as follows,

“It is, moreover, the character of that system, which nowhere admits the legitimacy of absolute power, to compel the whole body of citizens incessantly, and on every occasion, to seek after reason, justice, and truth, which should ever regulate actual power. The representative system does this, (1) by discussion, which compels existing powers to seek after truth in common; (2) by publicity, which places these powers when occupied in this search, under the eyes of the citizens; and (3) by the library of the press, which stimulates the citizens themselves to seek after truth, and to tell it to power” (cited in Habermas 1989: 101).

Edgar describes the centrality of effective public opinion as the ‘truth’ of the theory of the public sphere which saw parliamentary activity as subject to publicity, and law as the product (not of a ruler’s will) but of informed reasoning and deliberation of the public (and not just scholars) (2004: 38). Fraser also asserts that the terms under which citizens participate matter; if the purpose of public spaces is the generation of public opinion then the validity of that opinion rests on the citizen’s capacity to correlate with the state. Without these two aspects, Fraser believes that the concept loses its critical force and political point (2005 cited in Ayish 2008: 33). How then, are we to conceive of an Arabic public sphere when non-democratic and non-egalitarian structures continue to hinder the capacity of public opinion? The question therefore is: in circumstances where liberal-political rights associated with the formation of the
public sphere are absent, and where citizen participation lacks the mechanisms of directly influencing government policy, is it still applicable to speak of a public sphere?

In a case study of the Egyptian branch of the regionally active Muslim Brotherhood, Wickham sought to understand how change can happen at the level of the polity without change in political structures. She illustrated how the movement succeeded in transforming itself into a force to be reckoned with not by challenging state power directly, but rather by working within the rules of the present social and political order with the ultimate aim of transforming that order from the bottom up. Wickham describes how the movement has managed to create new models of political leadership and community by gradual appropriation of public space, in effect Islamizing the culture before Islamizing the state. Wickham concludes that transformation may occur at the level of the polity even in the absence of a change in regime (1994: 507-509).

Wickham thus rejects attempts to identify the emergence of civil society in the Arab world as a ‘prerequisite’ of democratization. Instead, she argues that,

“...we need to separate the question of political change from the study of a specific political trajectory – the shift from authoritarianism to democracy – in which it has been couched. Efforts to locate civil society or other ‘prerequisites’ of democratic reform reveal more about the preoccupations of Western scholars than they do about new social configurations in the Middle East today.” (1994: 509).

To Wickham, an independent civil society has its autonomy protected by a formally backed legal mandate, which is not the case in Arab states. The intervention of Arab governments into the affairs of ‘independent’ associations means that these associations may at times serve as the sites of social and political expression, but they do not qualify as civil society actors.

Such research into the survival and persistence of social and political participation even in the absence of legal guarantees can inform our own understanding of how ‘public spher ing’ can manifest into multiplicities of public spheres even in the absence of institutional structures that ‘protect’ an ‘autonomous’ and ‘official’ public sphere. This highlights the need to further explore the relationship between ‘state’ and ‘civil society’ in the Arab world, an issue addressed by Nicola Pratt at length. Pratt outlines how Arab governments have co-opted civil society institutions into supporting their national modernization programmes even under authoritarian
circumstances. This has been especially true of the spurt of service-providing NGOs whose main aim is to provide a service to the population, and do not care much about whether they operate in democratic or non-democratic contexts. In fact, Pratt notes that, instead of facilitating democratization, the increase in civil society institutions since the 1980s has coincided with the introduction of measures that further restrict freedoms and clamp down on political opposition (2007: 124-125). Pratt’s analysis does not dispute the existence of spaces that constitute civil society in the region, but her thesis does suggest that it might be more helpful to eschew from classic liberal conceptions of civil society as an independent sphere beyond the state, with the power to counter-balance state authority. Pratt goes on to distinguish two contested conceptions of civil society that exist in the Arab world, which she describes as the formal/associative and the informal/affective. The formal/associative model resembles Western liberal conceptions of civil society and concerns the development of political parties, professional syndicates and human rights groups among other independent community organizations. She points out that if one is to apply this model of civil society to the Arab world, one would naturally assume that civil society in the region is weak (2007: 125 – 126). On the other hand, the second conception of civil society includes the more traditional groupings that are “autonomous from the state and are rooted in the people”, such as “the mosque, religious orders, primordial solidarities, including family, kin, tribe and other affective solidarities” (2007: 126). Such an understanding of civil society renders it omnipresent in Arab societies.

Pratt draws her ‘alternative’ conceptualisation from the work of Gramsci who maintains that civil society is in fact an intrinsic part of the modern state; to Gramsci, civil society is not merely constituted by a range of independent and voluntary institutions and actors, but rather, it is a sphere of ideas and culture in the widest possible sense. According to this definition, civil society can be seen to manifest in sites of ideological struggle, where the battle for the hearts and minds of citizens is waged: the media, places of worship, debating salons, community hall meetings and even the private sphere of the family (cited in Pratt 2007: 11-12). Therefore, civil society institutions under authoritarian regimes may not resemble or behave like their counterparts in liberal contexts, yet that does not negate the presence of civil society in itself (Pratt 2007: 11-12).

Thus, whilst Wickam’s study is concerned with political change in the Arab world and Pratt’s thesis explores the presence and agency of civil society in the region, both their works inform a similar trajectory of thought: they both reject the application of prevalent Western
Theories of change, political and social, to the context of the Arab world. Both authors posit that such paradigms tend to characterise change as ‘linear’ and neglect the nuances of change in the Arab world. Their solution is to look for the ways in which change exists and is happening rather than assessing it according to a model of ‘what should happen’. By doing so, they reveal complex processes of social and political negotiations that are pervasive and flexible, adapting differently as situations arise. This same line of thought informs this thesis’s approach to exploring Arabic public spheres: rather than assessing their conformity to normative blueprints, the attempt is to explore the existence not of an official public sphere, but of the ways in which public spheres intersect, across the political and the cultural, and allow for spaces, or at least instances, of ‘public sphering’.

Yet, this leaves the matter of ‘agency’ of public opinion unanswered. To this end, Marc Lynch stresses the importance of distinguishing between the concepts of public argument and public opinion. He promotes the notion of conceiving an Arab public sphere specifically in terms of public arguments and debates, rather than the more generic concept of public opinion that “could mean anything from the distribution of views through society to the outcome of opinion surveys” (2003: 58). Conceiving the public sphere in terms of public arguments, to Lynch, is a more useful way to think about non-democratic countries because it facilitates analysis of the formation and articulation of public opinion, even under conditions of repression such as those in the Arab world. Thus, while even strong public consensus in the Arab world lacks the mechanisms to affect policy outcomes, as envisioned in Habermas’s two-track conception of modern democratic systems, Lynch maintains that the weakness of these mechanisms should not imply an absence of a public sphere in itself (ibid. 58). Rather, the Arabic public sphere needs to be understood as “less directed and more encompassing than public opinion strictu sensu” (Zayani 2008: 64). The emphasis thus shifts to the processes through which argument is formed, and the means through which these arguments are then renegotiated and contested in order to become pervasive; an understanding of the public sphere (or rather, spheres) more congruent with feminist critiques than with Habermas’s original thesis.

Therefore, what Wickham, Pratt and Lynch’s studies suggest is that public spheres do exist in the Arab world, even in the absence of independent civil society institutions and guarantees of liberal-political rights. The Arabic public spheres are, like Fraser’s model, plural, and their relationship with the state (and other counterpublics) is one of contestation. This suggests that any definition of the Arabic public sphere is infinitely wider in scope than that of
the Habermasean normative ideal, and grows out of Gramsci’s notion of civil society as a site of ideas, culture and ideological struggle. To Lynch, public argument, rather than public opinion, is the most obvious manifestation of the Arabic public sphere, and more suited to understanding debate and contestation in non-democratic settings.

In sum, the chapter thus far has discussed the context of Habermas’s original concept of the bourgeois public sphere, and the ensuing revisions, both by Habermas and his critics, which continue to inform the theory’s relevance to contemporary life. The chapter then went on to discuss the universality of the concept of the public sphere and the criteria through which it can be examined in non-European contexts. The first criterion to be raised was that of autonomy, and the centrality of an autonomous space – somewhere between the private and the public, the state and the home – for the effective functioning of the Habermasian public sphere. This was contrasted to prevalent conceptions of space in the context of Arabic and Muslim states, which are largely non-linear and constitute several intersecting identifiers, from kinship to religious affiliation alongside the classic home/state binary. However, as Ayish argues, normative Islamic concepts (such as the common good, Shura [consultation] over public affairs and the inclusivity of the Muslim Umma) are all compatible with normative understandings of Habermas’s public sphere. Thus, even whilst autonomy in the Arabic Islamic context varies from its European counterpart, the communal attributes of the Islamic faith, which transcends the public and informs all actions in everyday life, propels the realisation of the same epochal mode of citizenship. The diversity of identifiers that intersect to form the web of ‘spaces’ further informs the importance of understanding Arabic public spheres as multiple.

The second criterion discussed was that of public opinion and its capacity to directly influence state policy as a central component of a normative public sphere. Even Nancy Fraser, who critiqued Habermas’s original concept of a single, overarching public sphere and advanced an argument for transformation based on contestation and negotiation as opposed to rational-deliberation, insists that the concept of the public sphere loses its ‘edge’ if the capacity to influence public making bodies is inexistent. Yet, building on studies by Wickham, Pratt and Lynch, a wider understanding of public argument was conceived that incorporated public expression and its manifestations in non-democratic contexts, and the ways they come to bear on and shape public policy. Rather than apply linear models, this approach is sensitive to the ways in which ‘public spherings’ exists and adapts. While this remains different to direct influence, this antifoundational approach allows us to explore not just how states respond to
public opinion, but also the ways in which inequalities are portrayed and contested within and between publics. This argument was in fact included in Habermas’s original thesis, in which the author argued that before the development of structures that guaranteed the sustainability of the political public sphere, such as rights of speech and assembly, the capacity to critique was developed in a much more fluid environment: the literary public sphere. It follows then that if we are to develop a more sound theory of the Arabic public sphere we must also incorporate its literary and cultural manifestations, and explore participation that amounts to ‘public sphering’ in these domains.

**Between the political and the literary**

If we are to accept the idea that Arabic public spheres do exist, albeit in a wider and more encompassing sense than allowed within the parameters of Habermas’s original theory (or indeed, Western media theory more generally), then we must also reconsider the capacity of Arabic public spheres to ‘affect’ state policy directly, as was discussed above. Such an approach to understanding Arabic public spheres must be, firstly, antifoundationalist and fluid; rather than outlining blueprints that sustain a public sphere, this approach encourages us to accept discourse, in the widest possible sense, as sites of ‘public sphering’. It follows that these public spheres be thought of as plural, and also as existing rather than nascent. While such existing spheres may lack the normative ideals associated with inclusivity and equality, the sites of the public sphere are understood as facilitating debate and persuasion that 1) reveals and 2) challenges injustices and social stratification. Therefore, rather than argue that the existence of the Arabic public sphere rests on institutional and constitutional safeguards, an Arabic public sphere is instead understood as a mechanism through which arguments for creating certain institutional and constitutional circumstances are developed, sustained and elaborated on so as to become more persuasive.

In Habermas’s account, the fully developed bourgeois public sphere was a product of two “fictitious” identities: the role of property owners (who partook in political public sphere debates surrounding state and economy with an intention to influence policy) and the role of “human beings pure and simple” (whose ‘inconsequential’ meetings more closely resembled ideals of inclusivity and equality) (1989: 56). Habermas argues that the public sphere cannot function without those two roles informing each other,
“The circles of persons who made up the two forms of public were not even completely congruent. Women and dependents were factually and legally excluded from the political public sphere, whereas female readers as well as apprentices and servants often took a more active part in the literary public sphere than the owners of private property and family heads themselves...As soon as privatised individuals in their capacity as human beings ceased to communicate merely about their subjectivity but rather in their capacity as property-owners desired to influence public power in their common interest, the humanity of the literary public sphere served to increase the effectiveness of the public sphere in the political realm” (ibid.).

To Habermas, the literary public sphere, most developed in the Parisian salons, were sites where,

“...conversation and discussion were elegantly intertwined...the unimportant (where one had travelled and how one was doing) was treated as much with solemnity as the important (theatre and politics) was treated en passant” (1989: 34)

The salons served as sites of genesis; they facilitated the synthesis of ideas in the widest possible sense, from the literary and the musical to the political, and they were the primary sites where opinion was emancipated from capital, and critique was developed in a more inclusive environment than possible in coffee-houses; Habermas illustrates it as follows,

“in the salons the nobility and the grande bourgeoisie of finance and administration assimilating itself to that nobility met with the “intellectuals” on an equal footing. The plebeian d’Alembert was no exception; in the salons of the fashionable ladies, noble as well as bourgeois, sons of princes and counts associated with sons of watchmakers and shopkeepers. In the salon the mind was no longer in the service of a patron; “opinion” became emancipated from the bonds of economic dependence...There was scarcely a great writer in the eighteenth century who would not have first submitted his essential ideas for discussion in such discourse...The salon held the monopoly of first publication: a new work, even a musical one, had to legitimate itself first in this forum.” (ibid. 33-34).

Habermas attributed the development of this literary public sphere to the emergence of a market of information that began to challenge the monopoly of interpretation dictated by the
authorities of the day (the Court and the Church) over disciplines of philosophy, literature and art. This was also tied to the development of a capitalist economy; as philosophical and literary works became increasingly accessible through production and distribution in the nascent capitalist market, art ceased to function as a representation of the court (and Church’s) power. This in turn facilitated deeper reflection of prevalent meanings, and propelled the development of the art of critique. The very act of critique was thus developed within the literary sphere before it was extended to the political.

Jim McGuigan went on to expand (or “update”) the concept of the literary public sphere into a theory that accounts for the ways in which mediated mass-popular entertainment continues to account for the “articulation of politics, public and personal, as a contested terrain through affective (aesthetic and emotional) modes of communication.” (2005: 427). McGuigan’s cultural public sphere considers the ways through which modern mediated entertainment in its myriad forms continues to allow reflection on social issues, personal and public, and contribute to the ways in which publics “imagine the good life”. Such mediation, and ensuing participation, may be aesthetic, emotional and affective, but it remains paramount to the articulation of politics and the negotiation of ‘who we are’ and ‘how we live’:

“The cultural public sphere trades in pleasures and pains that are experienced vicariously through willing suspension of disbelief; for example, by watching soap operas, identifying with the characters and their problems, talking and arguing with friends and relatives about what they should and should not do. Images of the good life and expectations of what can be got out of this life are mediated mundanely through entertainment and popular media discourses. Affective communications help people to think reflexively about their own lifeworld situations and how to negotiate their way in and through systems that may seem beyond anyone’s control on the terrain of everyday life. The cultural public sphere provides vehicles for thought and feeling, for imagination and disputatious argument, which are not necessarily of inherent merit but may be of some consequence.” (2005: 435).

McGuigan goes on to imply that Victorian Britain is better understood through its literary fiction, such as Middlemarch (1871) and The Way We Live Now (1875) than by reading its newspapers such as The Times. He argues that “The great realist novels of the nineteenth
A similar case is put forward by Mamoun Fandy that accounts for the ‘truth’ of the literary in revealing the realities and experiences of life in the Arab world, political, social and personal. He argues that in authoritarian settings like Egypt, fictional writing often trades places with journalistic reporting. Fandy explains that,

“[M]ost journalists give their accounts of the problems of their own societies and the abuses of their own governments in fictional rather than journalistic form. For example, when Egyptian journalist Gamal Al-Ghitani wanted to write a critical account of the Nasser era, he did not write it for Al-Akhbar, the semi-government daily newspaper that he worked for. Instead, he wrote his famous novel, Zeini Barakat. The critical account of Nasser’s rule was transported to the period of the Mamluk-ruled Egypt (1250-1517). Although the main characters portrayed resemble the important figures in Nasser’s government, the estrangement created by casting them in the remote era of the Mamluks saved Ghitani from being put on trial for defaming the Egyptian government and ridiculing the president, a charge still used to silence opponents of the regime.” (2007: 6-7).

Ghitani’s novel is certainly not the only example. Among others Fandy mentions are Waguih Ghali’s Beer in the Snooker Club, Ahdaf Soueif’s In the Eye of the Sun, and Nageeb Mahfouz’s famous trilogy on Cairene society: Sugar Street, Palace Walk, and Midaq Alley. Fandy concludes that, “The interchangeable quality of fiction and journalism is very common in settings where a confrontation with power could prove costly” (2007: 7). It appears that the cultural public sphere, in the Arab world, not only informs the development of the political public sphere, but also acts as an escape, or shelter, from the implications of political activity in non-democratic contexts.

Similarly, Makdisi argues that postcolonial Arabic literature, fictional and non-fictional, is the primary medium for the genesis of “modernism” and its contestation of the political. He argues that this “modernism” forms the rubric of demands for entirely new conceptualisations of the present that reject those of “modernity” as well as “tradition”. “Modernity, to the author, is characteristic in the arguments of those seeking to emulate the European ‘unidirectional’ path to development in the Arab world; at the same time “tradition” became the
weapon of choice by many post-independence Arab governments seeking to dictate an Arabic “Nahda” [enlightenment] by prescribing [solely] to Arab history for guidance (Makdisi 1995: 88-104). Makdisi argues that both narratives fail to “interrogate the contemporary” in the same way as the “modernism” of the literature does, and in so doing, produces “…not merely the expression or the articulation of crisis but rather the reality of crisis itself; it does not replicate reality but rather contributes to the production of the real in the Arab world.” *(ibid. 98)*.

McGuigan’s theory of the cultural public sphere is not confined to literature, but also includes mass-popular entertainment in the widest possible sense, including television soaps which he even posits are “the most reliable documents of our era” (2005: 430). He explains that “Affective communications are not only valuable as historical evidence; they are themselves sites of disputation, as the history of the arts in general would attest” *(ibid.)*.

Lila Abu-Lughod in turn considers the processes of disputation, ideological and social, in Egyptian serials (which alongside Syrian serials may be considered the equivalent of television soaps in the Arab region). In her study of popular Egyptian serials she finds that they are marked by significant exclusions, most notably, the failure to acknowledge the existence of a growing Islamist identity. Particularly, this has been manifested in a thorough overriding of religion as a source of morality on screen as well as dissociating Islamist portrayals of piety (such as dress codes) from depictions of everyday Egyptian life (1993: 27-28). Abu-Lughod attributes this ideological trend to two factors; firstly, the age-range of the directors and producers, many of whom came of age during Nasser’s era which characteristically employed mass media to ideologically “educate” on national development and associated values, including secularism and socialism *(ibid. 28-29)*. The second reason cited by Abu-Lughod is the growing dissatisfaction with the economic liberalization policies adopted since the premiership of Sadat, and the resulting “romanticising” of Nasser’s socialist ideals *(ibid. 29)*.

Sreberny and Mohammadi (1997) refer to this as the “politization of tradition” and argue that alternative identities and political goals are often associated with rewriting collective identity and the articulation of a sense of collective memory (1997: 232). The authors argue that in non-democratic states (like Iran) where the political sphere has been repressed, “popular culture almost inevitably becomes the locus of political opposition” *(ibid. 229)*. As such:
“even if the existence of some delimited formal sphere called the ‘political’ is lacking, that does not mean that politics does not exist, but rather that it is not in actuality separated from the broader sociocultural milieu in which competition for symbolic meaning occurs.” (ibid.).

This intersection of the cultural and the political further reveals the need to understand and explore public spheres in their widest possible sense, including the ways in which the art world and the official ‘political’ world feed into and inform each other. This is particularly the case in the Arab world where structures that sustain ‘official political’ publics are absent. The ways in which these publics continue to exist, therefore, is dependent on a nuanced web of shifting private/public, fiction/non-fiction and artistic/political dichotomies. In the words of Peter Hohendahl, debates on the history, present and future of the public sphere have always been, at the same time, debates about the “possibilities of culture” (1979: 89 – my emphasis). Thus, “Habermas’ theory of the public sphere offered a model for unravelling the political and social element in the concept of culture” (ibid.).

Such an approach to the Arabic public sphere has been much neglected, as was argued in the Introduction. This thesis attempts to counter such trends by exploring public debates surrounding the Jordanian parliamentary elections of 2007 across a political mediated platform (the transnational news media) and a cultural platform (interactive theatre). Relevant literature reviews to both are provided in their respective chapters (V and VII). This proposed shift in understanding the Arabic public sphere, as has been noted, relies on a conceptual emphasis on discourse, and the possibilities of disputation, rather than a framework of blue-prints and legal/structural developments. This has been described as an examination of how ‘public sphering’ actually happens, even in the absence of an autonomous and consequential public sphere. This emphasis on ‘public-sphering’ in turn, places the citizen, and by extension the public, as central to understanding the Arabic public sphere; for if we are to speak of ‘public sphering’, we are in fact exploring the ways in which citizens do engage, and do participate, and most crucially for the Arab world, do negotiate and contest. An inductive theory of the Arabic public sphere then rests on deeper insight into the practices of publicness, at the level of the citizen, in the Arab world.
Citizens, ‘public sphering’, and gender in the public sphere

Egyptian sociologist Saaddine Ibrahim pointed out that the revolutions that brought many of the single-party republics of the Arab world to power (through the 50s-70s) identified their struggles with the “third global democratic wave” worldwide (cited in Khoury 30/5/2007). More than 40 years on, however, these Arab ‘republics’ are some of the most restrictive security states in the region. Such arguments imply that pluralistic constitutions in the Arab world are no guarantee of democracy.

Similarly, those who dismiss the Arabic public sphere argue that its inexistence is due to the lack of structural and procedural guarantees of rights necessary for its institution, such as rights of assembly and free speech. The questions posed by this thesis, however, seeks to explore whether public spheres can in fact manifest without such institutional guarantees and in the absence of legal, structural and political changes. It is useful in this light to cite Benjamin Barber’s distinction between what he refers to as democratic foundations and democratic sustainability. In explaining the limitations of democratic foundations, Barber argues that a ‘right’ is never constant, and will always be reliant on an engaged and active citizenry for the necessary processes of reinterpretation and adaptation. Therefore, he asserts that “Democracy may be established by a foundational logic, but it is sustained only by a logic of citizenship” (1996: 354-355).

A such, if we accept that “Democracy is both a process and a product of struggles against power” (Guidry and Dawyer 2003: 273), we can similarly accept that ‘the public sphere is both a process and a product of contestation with social and political exclusion’. Similarly, if we accept that there are indeed instances where marginalised groups challenge the lack of democracy or the limitations of existing democracy in their societies (ibid.), we can then also accept that citizens can engage and influence public policy in instances of weak public spheres as well as strong/autonomous public spheres. The processes are not determined by the structures; the absence of favourable structures makes the process a struggle, but does not negate its existence. The most important quality of ‘public sphering’ in this regard is therefore pervasiveness.

Nicola Pratt raises the issue of sustainability and democracy in the context of the Arab world and insists that procedural democracy, which guarantees citizens minimum liberal rights,
does not necessarily lead to “sustained” democratization. Yet, she goes on to warn against privileging the ‘nation’ or the ‘group’ at the expense of the individual citizen, as has been the case in the Arab world. She points out that identity-based groups in the Arab world, those based on religious or tribal affiliation, represent “a more organic or communal conception of the polity, in which a democracy would enable the group, rather than the individual, to be the bearer of rights” (2007: 126). Pratt illustrates the example of the ‘single-party republics’ of the Arab world (Egypt, Syria, Algeria, Tunisia and pre-2003 Iraq) and traces how their ‘national modernization’ projects, launched after successfully gaining independence from colonialism, sought to associate modernization to the collective nation rather than the well being of the individual citizen. Any new rights granted to citizens in the process were in fact intended to mobilize support for the government, in effect consolidating moral and political authority in the regime as the head of the nation state (ibid. 12). In such a manner, defining the public good became a prescribed commodity dictated by an increasingly authoritarian state; this ties into Mellucci’s critique of cultural domination. Mellucci has described cultural exploitation as a form of domination tied not to a lack of information, but to the “exclusion from the power of naming” (1996 cited in Stevenson 2003: 17-18). Whilst it can be argued that such communal understandings are a feature of Arabic societies and their rejection of “individualising” Western ideologies, such arguments fail to account for the ways in which the powerful are afforded control over dominant cultural meanings, and the ways in which such meanings contribute to cultural stratification, both on the levels of individual citizens as well as larger identity-based groupings, such as gender and ethnicity. Even at the level of tribal affiliations, this can manifest in certain clans being deemed more noble and powerful than others within the same tribe.

Incorporating these arguments into our understanding of the Arabic public sphere introduces citizens as an important participants in ‘public sphering’; citizens attribute the public sphere its very ‘publicness’ as they engage with issues of public concern, negotiate meanings and understandings of power, then continue to sustain the debate allowing it to become pervasive. Applying this distinction to the theory of the Arabic public sphere encourages us to look for manifestations of ‘public-sphering’ that inform the ways in which publicness is negotiated and contested even in the absence of a structural public sphere. Or as Dahlgren sums it up,

“Social structure, broadly understood, of course plays a major role in defining the character of the public sphere. Also, one of the recurring themes in the texts is that we must understand the public sphere in terms of sociocultural interaction among citizens...
Chapter I: The Public Sphere

Sociocultural interaction has to do not only with encounters in which people act out their roles as citizens and discuss social and political issues. It also has to do with the more fundamental construction of social reality at the intersubjective level. Society is in part generated, maintained and altered in our ongoing interactions, in a complex interplay with structural and historical factors. Norms, collective frames of reference, even our identities, ultimately derive from sociocultural interaction. In short, it is via such interaction, and the practices it embodies, that we generate our culture. This dimension of interaction constitutes an irreducible component of the public sphere...the functioning of the public sphere is greatly dependent upon the nature of sociocultural interaction.” (1995: x-xi).

Thus, exploring the Arabic public sphere through the prism of citizenship enables us to explore the ways exclusions are contested as acts of ‘public-sphering’. According to Lister the concept of citizenship has expanded significantly in the past decade, and inclusive citizenship is now about symbolic recognition as much as it is about access to formal rights (Lister 2007: 51). In fact, Anne Phillips asserts that recognition struggles are “very much struggles for political voice” (2003 cited in Lister 2007: 53). Citizenship is thus conceived as a ‘momentum concept’ that must be continuously reworked to realize more of its anti-hierarchical potential, making it a valuable tool for marginalized groups struggling for social justice (John Hoffman 2004 cited in Lister 2007: 49). For this purpose, the public sphere has been drawn on by discursive democracy theorists who are interested in the ways in which democratic practices are sustained. In this light, Buckingham has argued that Habermas’s account of the public sphere is more than a work of historical sociology; rather,

“...it seeks to provide a theory of the production of subjectivity – an account of how society produces the subject position ‘citizen’, and hence what it means to participate in public life” (2000: 25).

This further implies the importance of a conception of the Arabic public spheres that incorporates an understanding of citizen participation as ‘public networking’. As follows, this also requires us to explore the concept of ‘exclusion’ from the public sphere. Feminist critiques in particular have pointed to the gendering of the public sphere, both in terms of the exclusion of women from the ‘official’ political sphere of coffee-houses, as well as the alternative paths to publicness pursued mostly through the parameters of a cultural public sphere that informed and
grew to define and influence what was deemed ‘political’. Thus, exploring the gendering of Arabic public spheres and the dynamic of exclusion/inclusion gains further potency in the context of this thesis and its aim of incorporating the cultural into understandings of public spheres in the Arab world.

Habermas’s original conceptualisation of the bourgeois public sphere was critiqued, as has been noted, for its narrow definition of what constitutes a public. Habermas initially argued that coffee house discussions saw private persons eschew rank and status and deliberate as equal citizens, in such a form that even a poor shopkeeper could visit a coffee house and partake in discussions several times a day (Habermas 1989: 33). However, this inclusivity has been questioned on two fronts; firstly, its marginalisation of plebeian public spheres and their diverse political activities (see Geoff Eley 1987) and the exclusion of women, as well as minority groups.

In The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere Habermas did note that women were excluded from London’s coffee-house discussions (though not formally excluded from the coffee-houses themselves, their presence was “untenable” and even when present, they were not considered equals (see Ellis 2008: 162-163). He also noted their [futile] protests against being left alone in the evenings as their husbands went about their new found commitment to ‘rational-critical’ deliberation. This was not the case, Habermas contended, in the Parisian salons which were, in comparison, much more female friendly. The reason, to Habermas, lay in the perceived laissez faire conversations of the salons which, he argued, were not as effective or consequential as the debates of the coffee-houses. Another reason, possibly, is the original purpose of salons as sites for “gallant pleasures” (Habermas 1989: 32-34). Yet, inconsequential as they were perceived to be, the literary public sphere was, to Habermas, in fact the site of genesis of the political, and it was to inform the workings and development of the political public sphere. Writers submitted ideas first in this forum, musicians their compositions, for both aristocrat and shopkeeper to hear, listen and respond to. Not only were the salons female-friendly, but as Werbner (1999) illustrates, many were female-run.

Like Habermas, Werbner argues that the salons were the initial sites of the development of critique as a deliberative (though not necessarily rational) tool, and it was from the salons that the critical went on to inform the political and the economical, particularly so before the French revolution:
“...women were very much a part of the opposition to absolutism, and their activity took more or less overtly political forms. The salons, run by elite women, sponsored discussions that contributed to what became a critical and dissenting ‘public opinion’. This public included women but only those of wealth, education and social grace” (Scott 1996 cited in Werbner 1999: 224).

Post-revolution in France, however, saw the growing “naturalisation of male privileges” that, like in the UK and US, were ‘adopted’ “in the name of universal rights”; rather than encourage gender equality, these universal rights resulted in the adoption of a strict private/public divide that confined women to the sphere of the domestic (ibid.). Werbner argues that this divide was overtly sexualised; in the UK and US women were portrayed as ‘mothers’ and ‘carers’ and their confined domesticity framed along arguments of “protection” from the “dangerously sexualised male”. In France, on the other hand, the rationale for confining women to the domestic was attributed to their perceived sexual voraciousness; “political women” who defied these boundaries were increasingly depicted as ‘ugly’ and indiscernible as women (with beards and other male features that stripped them of their femininity). In such a manner, the public/private divide was enforced and male privileges instilled...and the political public sphere of coffee-houses thus became a gentleman’s club.

This divide, while real, encouraged women to seek other avenues for ‘public spher ing’. Mary Ryan’s case study of North American women outlines how women of different classes and ethnicities did so, from forming voluntary associations and philanthropic organizations (the bourgeoisie) to supporting the protests of the male-dominated working middle class (cited in Fraser 1990: 61). Similarly, Davidoff and Hall’s (1991) case study of nineteenth century middle class provincial life in England traced the varying ways in which a minority of women successfully (if inconsistently) participated in men’s voluntary associations and the formation of public opinion (see Rendall 1999: 480). Another case in point is Stephen Howards’s examination of periodical and newspaper biographies of women in the eighteenth century that concludes that women received “extensive and expanding coverage” (cited in Rendell 1999: 480). Therefore, while hegemonic notions of private domesticity were pervasive, women successfully bypassed public-private distinctions, increasing their participation, and crucially, their visibility, in public life. Fraser (1990) elaborates that the exclusion of women from political participation rests on Habermas’s notion of the bourgeoisie as THE public, and fails to consider how women innovatively formed alternative publics, sometimes within the ‘private’ spheres of domesticity,
to construct alternative paths to public life. And it is in this light that Werbner warns that upholding the existence of a divide between public and private must continue whilst at the very same time questioning the very existence of such a divide. The many ways in which the private does in fact spill into the public and affects it points to a fluid and constantly transforming relationship.

All such critiques and studies reveal the complex ways through which women excluded from ‘official’ publicness still found ways to engage effectively in public affairs and issues, sometimes under the guise of philanthropy and/or art. This understanding of a negotiated public/private divide corresponds to Fraser’s wider argument on the actual nature of the public sphere and its tools of persuasion (rather than deliberation) in the negotiation of meanings. Lister (1997) explains that,

“...the public-private divide can be understood as a shifting political construction, under constant renegotiation, which reflects both historical and cultural contexts as well as the relative power of different social groups. The public and private define each other and take meaning from each other” (1997: 42).

Indeed, anti-foundationalist arguments posit that any site of negotiation, contestation, or discourse is in fact part of the public sphere. When it comes to non-Western contexts, Werbner takes the argument further, outlining the specificity of feminist consciousness to the contextual (national and cultural surroundings) and the experiential (collective experience within that context). Werbner describes a process through which feminists in non-Western contexts draw upon multiple identities (“mothers, wives, democrats, peasants, workers and patriots, as well as women united in global sisterhood” (1999: 229)) to transcend their issues as women and to simultaneously develop critiques of the multiple oppressions they face, some as women, others as citizens in under-developed, poverty stricken or colonised contexts. Thus, many female activists reject the label ‘feminism’ for fear of appearing to demand a complete overhaul of the social system; instead they advocate their causes within the narrative of protecting families and communities rather than undermining them (Basu 1995 cited in Werbner 1999: 231). Yet, crucially, they do so while overtly rejecting the confinement of women to the sphere of the domestic (ibid.).

In some parts if the Muslim world, this had lead to a rise of a group of women who identify themselves as Islamic feminists (see Moghadam 2002). While not Islamists or
prescribing to Islamist doctrine, these emerging feminists set themselves the task of “bargaining with patriarchy”, or perhaps, ‘within’ it, in order to renegotiate their gender roles. They do so while rejecting the orthodox notion of ‘complementary rights’ that emphasise gender differences in rights and obligations (ibid.1146) and advocating greater consciousness about gender issues by promoting the egalitarian ethos of the Qur’an. Some have even nurtured reinterpretations of scripture that contribute a feminist perspective to reconstructing the Qur’an’s meaning, even though they continue to be met with controversy (ibid.1147). Within Arabic societies, Cooke (2000) outlines rhetorical strategies she names “multiple critiques” which women have developed to respond to the various forms of patriarchy and hierarchy they are affected by, firstly as women, secondly as post-colonial subjects in nondemocratic settings, and finally as Muslims in times of turbulent world affairs. Cooke insists that this is different to identity politics whereby the focus is the subject and where authority is derived from subjective perception and experience; multiple critique, crucially, retains consciousness of multiple others, including men who they share some of the same forms of oppression with (2000: 160-163). Women thus emphasise their loyalty and commitment to their community, even as they criticise its problems and injustices. This “fluid discursive strategy allows for conversations with many interlocutors on many different topics” (ibid.163).

As women in Arab societies construct more paths to public life, they are also introduced to new forms of hierarchy such as state and economy (in addition to their experiences of hierarchy within the family and community). Abu-Lughod pointedly describes how,

“Even today, young Bedouin women in Egypt try to resist their elders and the kin-based forms of domination they represent by embracing aspects of a commodified sexuality - buying makeup and negligees - that carry with them both new forms of controls and new freedoms” (1998: 13).

Abu-Lughod’s therefore suggests that discourses of new possibilities need to be recognised whilst also acknowledging poststructuralist critiques of liberalism and power (ibid.). Perhaps explorations of the emancipatory possibilities of the Arabic public spheres need to be followed with the same rationale. That way, the ways in which women participate in the political and cultural public spheres, and the way that participation is mediated, might transgress the binary of ‘oppressed’ and ‘empowered’ that gender equality campaigns seem to be couched in, and thus reveal the nuances of female engagement in everyday life. Just as Ryan revealed how women who were excluded from the official public sphere is the US found alternative ways of
influencing public policy, discussions of gender within Arabic public spheres need to look for the
diverse ways in which Arab women contest their positions, as women, but also as citizens.

Conclusion

Habermas’s public sphere has been itself contested on the grounds of historical
specificity and today is accepted as a ‘normative ideal’ according to which the relationship
between media and publicness can be examined. This has made the theory of the public sphere
particularly relevant to discussions of news media in the Arab world, where the introduction of
satellite dishes allowed viewers greater access to a plethora of opinions and perspectives on
current affairs beyond those provided by the region’s government-run broadcasters. Criteria for
conceiving the existence of the public sphere, such as autonomy and consequentiality, which
have been acknowledged by Habermas and later his critics as crucial for imparting to the public
sphere its “edge” remain problematic in their application to the notion of an Arabic public
sphere. This chapter has argued that in order to overcome this the concept of autonomy needs
to be understood not as an ‘imagined space’ between the state and the home (a linear social
formation that extends from the private through the public and to the governing administration)
but as a web of intricate fabrics and nuances that includes religion, culture as well as state.
Whilst this relegates autonomy into an abstract concept, it does allow for an understanding of a
more pluralistic and culturally embedded notion of publicness. To elaborate, while the linear
‘autonomy’ of the private/public dynamic in Western public spheres is conceived of in relation
to an administrative state, the Arabic public sphere needs to be understood as a plethora of
non-linear relationships between self, community, state and religious authority. While this lacks
the structural support for a “full fledged” public sphere, the resilience with which public debate
persists is an indication of the ways in which acts of ‘public sphering’ (perpetually renegotiated
and redefined) survive.

The chapter then considered the criterion of consequentiality and argued that whilst
public opinion in itself is problematic in relation to the functioning Arabic public spheres (as it
still lacks the mechanisms and potency to affect policy directly), a wider notion of public
argument allows for the more fluid conceptualisation of the ways in which change is contested
and negotiated within society. This conception of public agency is informed by a trajectory of
thought that rejects the blind application of Western models of linear change and instead
encourages an exploration of the ways in which public argument is in fact developed in the region, and the means through which its flexibility and adaptability allow its resilience in sometimes less than amiable circumstances. Understood within this prism, the Arabic public sphere accounts for the ways in which ‘public sphering’ happens at the level of the polity even in the absence of change at the level of the state, and how, at times, the developed pervasiveness of public argument does influence the administrative authority. Citizens, in this light, are an integral part of the public sphere as they account for its very ‘publicness’.

Following this conceptual configuration (or reconfiguration) of Arabic public spheres as existing and multiple, the chapter attempted to incorporate theories of the literary and cultural public spheres into this emerging conceptual configuration. It was noted that the literary public sphere of seventeenth century France was the site of the genesis of the political public sphere, and this deems the exploration of cultural public spheres in the context of the Arab world not only enlightening, but also necessary, especially in the absence of a fully-developed and legally safeguarded political public sphere. Incorporating theories of the cultural public sphere into conceptual understandings of the Arabic public sphere introduces the variables of discourse and contestation as processes of perpetual renegotiation, where criticism and reinterpretation are ‘practiced’. The ways in which this lead to the gendering of public spheres in Western Europe, in the sense of women becoming more active in the affective sphere of art and culture and an alternative route to publicity, in turn raises interesting questions about whether research into the Arabic public sphere can reveal insight into who is excluded, and how those excluded groups negotiate their exclusion. Research into Arab and Islamic feminism was noted to outline a trend of ‘contesting’ within hierarchy rather than producing gender-specific arguments for female emancipation. This dialectical approach to gender equality was explained by the increasing political and social gains acquired by Arab women; they are no longer subjected to patriarchal familial confines only, but increasingly, through their involvement in public life, facing the same hierarchical frames that [male] citizens are subjected to. It is thus through the practice of citizenship - the nuances of ‘public sphering’ - that this thesis seeks to examine the manifestations of Arabic public spheres.
Chapter II: Jordan: a narrative of nationhood – history, identity, politics and the domestic public sphere

The modern state of Jordan came into existence in 1921, a colonialist induced birth (with the stroke of Churchill’s pen, by the PM’s own account) and borders crafted by Gertrude Bell’s theodolite. Although not initially conceived as a political entity in its own right, the mandate of Transjordan, as it became known, created a nation state where cities and districts had only known loose allegiance to Empires and Caliphates rising and falling, and introduced a political structure where Bedouin nomads came and went like the tide. Therefore, the story of Jordan is not the common-place narrative of state-building. From the very start, it lacked a cohesive sense of place, an ideology, and a shared history. The historical narratives that did abound, among Jordan’s diverse locales, were oral not written. The country that became Jordan governed itself by comfortable political liaisons, between commercial towns like Salt, powerful tribes like Bani Sakhr, and agricultural regions like Ajlun. Refugee influxes would bring further stratification as the years went by.

Today, Jordan is by far the most stable and secure state in the region – although this focus on stability has come at a price. Stability at many times has meant enforced conformity, and a continuation of power politics of the ancient past. Jordanian identity, in this nascent narrative, is of porcelain fragility. Indeed, the building of a modern, cohesive, state was not a natural progression. The writing of a historical narrative is still a thorny process. And that is saying nothing of Jordan’s neighbours. Saudi Arabia to the south, and its initially antagonistic ruling dynasty, would later become a generous aid provider and a political ally. Iraq to the East and Syria to the North, post-WW1 they are both Hashemite kingdoms. But the French who colonized Syria were no fans of Churchill’s ‘Sharifian policy’ and the king was swiftly deposed. First is the revolution against the French, but post-independence revolutions continue to mark Syrian history until Assad’s military rule allows no change no more. Agreements with Syria are scarce, disagreements plentiful.

Iraq and Jordan also begin with brethren Hashemite rulers, but the tension rises as the plot thickens and Iraq lives a few revolutions of its own. And so it was that the Hashemite’s rein in prosperous Iraq was but a chapter, but it was among the harsh deserts of Transjordan that they survived. Years on, Hussein of Jordan and a Saddam Hussein of Iraq would share an
idiosyncratic friendship. But the price of the first Gulf War, for Jordan, was too high. The most precarious relationship of all continues to be Palestine, annexed by Jordan after the 1948 war and lost to Israel 19 years later. Domestically, the question of Palestine is still Jordan’s most sensitive chord; it was once played by Jordanian officials in power struggles, and it is still played by the Israeli right, and by elements within Jordanian society to whom identity and ethnicity are exclusive entities. Today, Jordan shares the longest border with Israel. The ‘peace’ treaty between the two states was signed in 1994. The success of the political endeavour depends on one’s definition of peace.

Islamic Empires and the politics of accommodation

One of the earliest references to Jordan is found in the 7th century, when Jordan is referred to by classic Muslim historians as Jund al-Urdun, an area inhabited largely by Arab tribes. While the Prophet Muhammad would fail to conquer Jund al-Urdun during his lifetime, his successor, the Caliph Abū Bakr, would later succeed (al-Bakhit 1982: 361). Realising how difficult the desert lands (and the tribes) were to administer, the first Islamic Caliphate was to pioneer a relationship of ‘political accommodation’ between the state and the tribes. Whilst the latter were to guarantee security and nonaggression, including the safety of trade routes and pilgrimage caravans, they would enjoy relative autonomy from the state in managing their affairs (having developed their own law to do so).

By the reign of the second caliphate, the ‘Ummayad dynasty, Jordan’s tribes would play a decisive role in maintaining Ummayad power against the threat of their rival Zubayris (ibid. 361), indicating a growing political role not only in their internal affairs, but also in those of the state. In fact, this relationship of political accommodation would hold even as successive empires collapsed: the ‘Ummayads, the Fatimids, the Ayuubids, the Mamluks and the Ottomans.

When the Mamluks came to power and took over several towns had emerged, including Irbid to the north, al-Salt to the west, and al-Karak in the south. For a brief period in 1341 Karak would become the capital of the entire Mamluk Sultanate and records show that it was inhabited by villagers and nomads alike (the most notable tribe being Bani Sakhr) and by followers of the Muslim and Christian faiths (al-Bakhit 1982: 362). Up until the 16th century the
province of al-Karak (known as Mamlakat al-Karak) would constitute (and be administratively responsible for) most of the lands compromising modern day Jordan.

Post-Mamluk rule, the newly established Ottoman Empire was very concerned about maintaining the welfare and comfort of pilgrims, on route to Hajj via Jordan, as an indication of the authority and sovereignty of the state (Mousa 1982: 385). Having no means of controlling the Jordanian tribes, the Ottoman state offered to pay their sheikhs stipends in return for the safety and protection of pilgrims, as well as requesting that they fill cisterns along the pilgrimage route with water for the pilgrim’s convenience (Mousa 2007: 88).

The Ottoman state did however abolish the ‘Khawah’ tax the Bedouins of the area had self-imposed on the farmers and villagers (Robins 2004: 10). Derived from the word ‘brotherhood’, the Khawah tax guaranteed the safety of farmer and produce in return for a share of the harvest. Norman Lewis explains that the powerful tribe of Bani Sakhr took Khawah from the town of al-Salt and, when strong enough, from al-Karak as well. The tax came in “...diverse forms: in cash, wheat, olive oil, tent-cloth and so on” (1987: 124). This tribal practice of ‘enforced brotherhood’ would discourage farmers and villagers from expanding their harvests and businesses in fear of greater demands by their ‘brothers’. Thus, the termination of the Khawah by the Ottoman state was a welcome relief, but it was almost immediately replaced with a tax payable to the new Sultans (albeit this new tax was enforced on Bedouin and villager alike). To this provision both complained “…that taxes were heavy and unwarranted given the poverty of the inhabitants” (Mousa 1982: 287). This was further exacerbated by the dearth of public services they received from the Ottoman state in return.

Another notable trend emerging under Ottoman rule was the migration and settlement of Circassian and Chechen families to Amman, al-Zarqa and Jerash. In 1878, when the first fifty Circassian families arrived in Amman, the ancient Philadelphia was without permanent inhabitants. Its lands were cultivated by farmers from al-Salt and Arab tribes frequently camped nearby to make use of the town’s water supplies (Lewis 1987: 107).

The Circassians, a non-Arab Muslim people, began migrating from their lands above the Black Sea in 1860 as a result of Russia’s ‘war of extermination’ against them (ibid. 96). They had the reputation of being ferocious fighters and enterprising industrialists, both qualities they would quickly attest to. The former was confirmed when they defeated local tribes at the
Balqawiyah skirmishes (reputedly over a girl from one of the tribes) and their presence was never challenged again. The latter manifested itself in the two-wheeled farm carts and four-wheeled wagons they introduced in Jerash; not only were they used for agriculture and trade, the enterprising Circassians even started “…running the [wagons] on regular schedules and with fixed fares to other towns” (ibid. 109).

The Circassians promoted a culture of enterprise in Jordan; they were the first to introduce roads and market places, and their settlements would later give way to major urban centres, Amman becoming in 1921 the Jordanian capital. Their willingness to use force to defend their interests put them at an advantage in comparison to the farmer, and perhaps even subdued the tax collectors of the Ottoman state, as Goodrich Freer observes in 1905, “…whereas the Fallahin [farmers] fear to attract attention by successful crops of fruit or grain, lest they be called upon to feed the Bedu and the taxgatherer, the Circassians fear no one, and at present pay no taxes. Hence, as well as from superior capacity and industry, they effect, as no fellah may venture to do, improvements of a kind which are permanent; they make walls and roads, they devise systems of irrigation, they plant hedges and trees.” (cited in Lewis 1987: 108).

The Hijaz railway, running from Damascus to Medina, would reach Amman in 1903 (or the end of 1902 by other accounts), and alongside it was extended a telegraph line with branches reaching Irbid, Salt, Karak and Aqaba (Mousa 1982: 388). This transformed Amman from an agricultural settlement into a vibrant market place as merchants started to settle in the town after the arrival of the railway (Lewis 1987: 108). However, local tribes saw the railway as a threat to their interests, especially since the Ottomans relied on them less for security provision (Mousa 1982: 388), and they were equally concerned over rumours of the state discontinuing their stipends (not all of which were being paid to them) (Lewis 1987: 126). This lead to skirmishes and several Shaikhs of the Bani Sakhr tribe revolted, but the Ottomans were able to suppress them swiftly.

Thus, before the outbreak of WW1, the lands compromising modern day Jordan did not constitute a political entity in their own right, but acquired a unique sense of cohesion based on values of political accommodation: first between the state and the tribes, second between the tribes and the villagers, and third between the state, tribes, villagers, and new comers who
introduced much needed services into an area the Ottoman state had neglected. It was a relationship of informal political liaisons, between an administrative body (the state), a security apparatus (the tribes), a working peasantry (the farmers) and the economic elite (Circassians and merchants from al-Salt and Syria).

The making of a state

In July 1915, whilst the Ottomans were busy fighting the Allies, a Hashemite Sharif from Mecca, Hussein Bin Ali, sent a letter to the British commissioner in Cairo, Sir Henry McMahon, breaching the possibility of the Arabs weakening the Ottoman state from within in return for Britain’s recognition of Arab independence and the proclamation of an Arab caliphate of Islam (naturally, with the Sharif assuming the role of Caliph). The McMahon-Hussein correspondence which ensued continued until March 1916 but

“was shrouded in ambiguity, vagueness, and deliberate obscurity. It reveals a continuous thread of evasive pledges by Britain and compromises by the sharif...Conflicting interpretations over this issue were to plague Anglo-Arab relations after the war” (Shlaim 1988: 23).

Such conflicts over interpretation would quickly materialise in the aftermath of the Arab revolt of June 1916, initiated by Sharif Hussein and his four sons, and financed and armed by Britain. The Arab’s contribution to the defeat of the Ottoman state and the victory of the allies was, to them, an exchange of mutual interest in return for Arab independence. However, Britain had signed with France, in May 1916, the Sykes-Picot agreement essentially dividing Arab lands into their respective spheres of influence. And in November 1917, the British government adopted the Balfour Declaration, calling for the establishment of a Jewish national home on the lands of Palestine. These European treaties, to the Arab peoples, mark the beginning of a series of Western betrayals.

In October 1918 an Arab government headed by Emir Faisal Bin al-Hussein was set up in Damascus, during which Transjordan (as it was now referred to) was considered a ‘southern extension’, an indication of “reactivating the practices of the former administration and co-opting the traditional local elites” (Robins 2004: 12). However, when the San Remo conference of April 1920 placed Syria under the French sphere of influence and the lands of Transjordan
under British provision, Jordan was left with no administrative centre. And so it began: with the creation of three autonomous administrations in Ajlun, al-Salt and al-Karak (the latter “grandiosely entitled ‘National Government of Moab’”). But these first attempts at local self-government were brief “chaotic flirtations” (Robins 2004: 14). Ajlun fractured along lines of traditional allegiances, and the Government of Moab found itself ruling little more than al-Karak after neighbouring cities and towns declared autonomy. In the merchant town of al-Salt, promise was tangible; attempts were made to create a central government and collect taxes for the purpose. But practicalities (or tax evasions?) prevailed (ibid. 14-15).

By that time, Emir Faisal had been offered the throne to the kingdom of Syria by the Syrian Congress in March 1920, but deposed by the French in June of the same year following the San Remo conference. Outraged by his brother’s dismissal, and the apparent demise of the promise of a large Hashemite caliphate, Abdullah bin al-Hussein, Sharif Hussein Bin Ali’s second son, arrived in the southern Jordanian town of Ma’an in November 1920 with the stated intention of marching on Syria to restore his brother’s throne.

It is claimed that Abdullah intended to reinstate the Hashemite throne in Syria and then assume the Iraqi throne himself, a prospect that deeply upset the British who, firstly, wanted to maintain good relations with their ‘suspicious’ French allies, and secondly, had already promised the throne of Iraq to Faisal to make up for his dismissal by the French in Syria (Shlaim 1988: 27). Thus, when Abdullah marched on from Ma’an, through al-Karak, finally setting up his headquarters in Amman in March 1921, he threw Churchill’s Cairo conference on Middle Eastern affairs into disarray (ibid.).

The outcome was a meeting between Churchill, Lawrence and Abdullah in which Abdullah was offered the emirate of Transjordan in return for his renunciation of “his avowed intention of conquering Syria and accept[ing] the validity of the British mandate” (Shlaim 1988: 28). Churchill suggested a six-month span in order to evaluate Abdullah’s performance, and Abdullah suggested that he be made king of Palestine as well as Transjordan, a suggestion rejected by Churchill on the grounds that it “conflicted with the British commitment to a Jewish national home” (ibid.).

And so the modern state of Jordan was established in April 1921 as the Emirate of Transjordan and Abdullah Bin al-Hussein was given the title of Emir. Abdullah’s first government
seemed intent on antagonizing the French in Syria, with his appointment of prominent members of the Arab independence movement (*Istiqlalists*) – most of them Syrian or Lebanese - in his government and among his aides. A case in point was his first chief advisor Rashid Tali’ah, who had been sentenced to death *in absentia* by the French for his political activities (Robins 2004: 21). And although personal and managerial antagonisms would arise between the British Residents and the Emir, the six months probationary period would pass, and British assistance would continue.

Abdullah’s initial efforts were not geared towards modern state-building, but rather, his “instinctive initial course was one of expediency: appease the larger, well-organized tribal groupings in order to harness or at least neutralise the powerful” (*ibid.* 23). He “immersed himself in tribal politics, making an enormous effort to cultivate shaykhs” (Alon 2005: 219). Thus, the politics of ‘political accommodation’ would be reinstated as the benchmark of Jordanian policy from the very early formation of the state.

**The politics of accommodation; a continuation**

Internal challenges to the newly formed Emirate of Transjordan emerged almost immediately, tax related issues being the prime motivator. The Kura ‘revolt’ of June 1921 on the grounds that the villagers had already paid animal tax to the autonomous administration before its termination and the establishment of the state, and two years later, in 1923, the Adwan tribe’s ‘taxes movement’ was trying to recover dues owed them from 1918-1920, as well as register discontent that their traditional rivals, the Bani Sakhr tribe, were exempt from paying taxes all together bounty of Emir Abdullah. In both ‘revolts’ the British [militarily] intervened on behalf of the state, and the new political centre survived.

Privileging Bani Sakhr, however, would soon prove to be a worthwhile endeavour. Starting in 1922, the Bedouin troupe of the rival Ibn Saud dynasty, known as the *ikhwan*, started raiding Transjordan from the southern border, once getting as close as 12 miles to Amman. Such raids would continue even after Mecca and Medina (the most prized cities of the Hijaz) fell into Ibn Saud’s hands subsequently ousting Sharif Hussein Bin Ali (Emir Abdullah’s father). Had the Bani Sakhr joined the *ikhwan* that would have marked the end of the new Emirate. Thus, Abdullah’s success at retaining the tribe’s loyalty, as well as the military expertise
of British forces and the RAF, would successfully put an end to Saudi expansionism (ibid. 26-27). In November 1925, the Saudis and Jordanians would sign a truce, the Hadda agreement, virtually promising the end of raids across the Jordan border – the expense being the grazing land of the Bani Sakhr tribe (Wadi Sirhan) (Lewis 1987: 133).

Seven years later, the Bani Sakhr would again be allowed to use the grazing area of Wadi Sirhan following the 1933 Treaty of Friendship between both countries, but by then several factors had already transformed the Bedouin lifestyle among Bani Sakhr. The first was the prolonged drought of 1926-1934, during which “Camels died in thousands” and “formerly wealthy shaykhs were reduced to penury” (ibid. 134). Thus started the practice of sheep-rearing instead of camel-herding, a transformation that improved the tribe’s standards of living and incorporated them into the nascent market economy; “They sold wool, milk or milk products, lambs and ageing animals” (ibid. 136).

The second factor was Glubb’s efforts to recruit tribesmen to serve in the Desert Patrol of the Arab Legion. Within two years (1931-1933), over 22% of Glubb’s force was made up of Bani Sakhr tribesmen. This trend continued along progressively, and by the 1950s five out of the ten infantry regiments were entirely Bedouin (the Arab Legion at the time followed a system of segregated Bedouin units) (Lewis 1987: 144). Today, Bani Sakhr remain well represented along every level in the army, and they continue to enjoy the benefits such a vocation graciously allows (such as army pay and pensions).

At the same time, Bani Sakhr’s adoption of Jordanian nationality would bring them closer to the state and the political centre in Amman. As early as 1929, Mithqal al-Fayiz, an influential Bani Sakhr leader, joined Emir Abdullah’s legislative council, and went on to occupy a variety of political posts. His eldest son, ‘Akif, was to follow suit. Today,

“Bedouin no longer receive regular subsidies, but they continue to benefit from the relationship of mutual support which subsists between them and the Palace. This relationship enables the shaykhs to bring influence to bear on government departments and thus to ‘channel resources to tribal members’” (ibid. 143).

The politics of accommodation, initiated by the first Islamic Caliphate would continue to define the relationship between the Jordanian state and its powerful tribes. No longer the
camel-rearing nomads of time-eternal, Jordanian Bedouins have come to dominate the state’s two most influential institutions. Firstly, they are very heavily represented in the Jordanian army and as thus they form the monarchy’s bedrock of security. For their uncompromised loyalty they receive benefits and privileges inaccessible to the rest of the population. Secondly, they have been fully incorporated into Jordan’s political centre and notable members hold and serve some of the most sensitive offices in the state. To give an example, the Interior Minister responsible for the November 2007 elections, on which this study is based, is himself a member of the Bani Sakhr tribe. And when King Abdullah II appointed his 15 year old son as regent in July 2009, their first act together following the appointment was a visit to the madareb [quarters] of Bani Hassan, a powerful tribe based in al-Mafraq.

Acquiring legitimacy and legality: draft constitutions and early elections

Early efforts to draft provisions for a legislature started in 1923 but were unsuccessful, resulting instead in a quasi-constitutional Organic Law which was adopted in 1928 (Brynen 1998: 72). “Its main innovation was the creation of a 21-member Legislative Council, with a three-year term” (Robins 2004: 37); however, the structure and representativeness of the council “all mitigated against independent action” (ibid.), and ultimate power remained vested in the figure of the Emir.

In 1927 an ‘Aliens Law’ was passed incorporating into the state a large number of Palestinian citizens who had been actively recruited as civil servants by the British administrators and the Emir for their educational backgrounds and experience. According to Robins, this marked the beginnings of defining the Palestinian-Jordanian as the ‘other’ largely because of perception on part of the Transjordanians that they were increasingly economically marginalised. Such perceptions were solidified by the drought and bad harvests (1927-1933) that affected Bedouin and farmer alike, whilst urban centres, particularly Amman, seemed to prosper. In 1936, nearly 32% of government employees were not Transjordanian by birth (ibid. 33-38).

Jordan’s first political movement to emerge in 1928 was thus the Transjordan National Congress (TNC) supported by the major tribal clans in the country. They raised the slogan ‘Transjordan for the Transjordanians’ and “attempted to use the Legislative Council to block the
appointment of more seconded officials from Palestine” (Robins 2004: 39). Whilst the TNC was to hold only six meetings, they were successful at expanding their presence in the Legislative Council; “The Council became a focus in particular for those who were born in Transjordan” (ibid. 40) and “the Legislative Council proved to be an entrée for native-born Transjordanians to the executive Council” (Wilson 1990 cited in Robins 2004: 40). The first elections were held in 1929, and the partly-elected-partly-appointed council sworn in shortly after.

Other political movements that followed were the People’s Party and the Solidarity Party. The People’s Party was meant to act as a counterweight to the TNC and had the backing of the Emir himself. The party’s success at winning elections in 1931 and 1934 “helped to sanitize the political impact of the Legislative Council” (Robins 2004: 46). The Solidarity Party was established in 1933 by a prominent member of the Bani Sakhr tribe, Mithqal al-Fayiz, and like the other two political movements, the emphasis was on personal – rather than ideological – politics.

In 1946 Transjordan gained independence from the British, and a new constitution and electoral law were adopted. The Emirate of Transjordan became the Hashemite Kingdom of Transjordan, and the Emir was proclaimed King. The Jordanian parliament was effectively divided into two houses: a lower house elected by the public, and a senate appointed by the King. On 14 May 1948 a Jewish State of Israel was declared on the lands of Palestine, and war broke out between the new state and its Arab neighbours. When the war subsided, Israel had acquired significantly more land than stipulated in the provisions of the UN partition plan, and the remaining lands of Palestine (effectively split into two: the West Bank and Gaza) were annexed by Transjordan and Egypt respectively.

Most historians point to Abdullah’s active ambition in seeking to expand his sphere of influence, and contribute his annexation of the West Bank of Palestine to such ends (see Shlaim 1988, Wilson 1990 and Robins 2004). The first Arab leader to seek reconciliation and a political solution with Israel, as early as the 1918, would assume pariah status among Arab leaders, yet “In his own way he was an ardent Arab nationalist” (Shlaim 1988: 32). He firmly believed in Arab unity and in a greater Syria that encompasses much of the Levant. He also firmly believed that it was he who was destined to lead the Arabs to this future. The political decisions he made in his reign, including the annexation of the West Bank in 1949 (and the cooperation with Israel
this entailed) were, to the King’s mind, a means of achieving wider Arab unity - under Hashemite rule.

**Flirting with liberalism**

Following the Emir’s annexation of the West Bank of Palestine there emerged the issue of incorporating the territory, politically, into the Kingdom of Transjordan. Abdullah quickly established a ‘National Palestine Congress’ that met in Amman in October 1948 and in Jericho less than two months later, after which the King pragmatically offered Jordanian citizenship to all Arab Palestinians, removed travel and customs restrictions across the Jordan River, and appointed three Palestinian ministers to his cabinet (*ibid.* 72). The King’s political ambition of a greater Jordan was finally legitimised on 11 April 1950 when general elections were held across both banks of the Jordan as a penultimate measure to unification across the River. For this end, 20 additional seats were added to the Chamber of Deputies to be contested by West Bank candidates – the same number of seats allocated the East Bank candidates. In the Senate, however, West Bankers remained outnumbered with the King’s appointment of 12 Transjordanians and 8 Palestinians (Shlaim 1988: 555-556).

On 25 April a bill was introduced to the new Transjordanian parliament (by a number of Palestinian MPs – a testament to the grace of the choreographer) calling for the “complete unity” and “union into one state” of Transjordan and Palestine (Al-Jaridah al-Rassmiyah [Official Gazette] 2 June, 1949). The Bill was passed unanimously, and the state became known as the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan (as opposed to Transjordan). Yet, with the expansion of the state emerged other problems; Jordan’s population had nearly tripled following the union and Palestinian refugees, estimated to number 458,250, found themselves seeking food and shelter across the newly expanded Kingdom (a burden largely relieved by UNRWA services) (UNRWA cited in Stevens 1952). King Abdullah, however, would rule his larger Kingdom for little more than a year; he was assassinated as he entered the al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem on 20 July 1951 to attend the Friday prayers. The assassination was later blamed on opposing Palestinian figures.

Talal Bin Abdullah succeeded his father as King of Jordan after his half-brother Nayef, initially the favoured successor, alienated the political elite. Talal’s rein was brief, a mere 11
months that ended by a diagnosis of schizophrenia, and brought his eldest son, Hussein, to the throne. Yet Talal’s short rein introduced the concept of constitutional monarchy into Jordanian statehood. The new King’s first project was the reformation the 1946 constitution. Talal’s reforms, ratified on 1 January 1952, made the government and ministers accountable to the parliament, curbed the power of the head of state, and established provisions for the declaration of martial law (however, Talal’s appointment of his father’s aide Tawfiq Abu al-Huda as PM insured the changes were more modest than previously announced by the King; see Robins 2004: 80-81).

Talal was also very popular with Jordanians who appreciated his nationalistic policies. He was an outspoken critic of British imperialism and was dedicated to improving relations with Arab states, namely Egypt and Saudi Arabia. However, as rumours of his increasingly erratic and violent behaviour increased, the Prime Minister of the day, Tawfiq Abu al-Huda, convened an extraordinary session of parliament that unanimously voted to depose the King on grounds of insanity. The end of his rein is, perhaps, a most fitting epitaph:

“Ironically, it was [Talal’s] own constitution that had provided the process for his demise, fittingly though for a man who was uncomfortable with his inherited role as a titular autocrat” (ibid. 82).

Prince Hussein was declared King on 11 August 1952 at the age of 16, but only assumed his duties on 2 May 1953 after reaching legal age. His first few years in office were inconsistent: his first Prime Minister was a new face to the political scene with little experience and undistinguishable performance. His second appointment signalled a revert back to the old guard of politicians that had served his grandfather King Abdullah I. The back-forth mode of political appointments played out for a while. The young King’s first election in 1954 was of questionable partiality, with ballot papers in the West Bank reputedly signalling the ‘pro-government’ candidates for the Arab Legion troops to vote for.

However, Hussein then embarked on what seemed like a political transformation, at a time when nationalistic sentiment, epitomised in Egypt’s Nasser, was on the rise in Jordan as well as regionally. His first step was ousting Glubb Pasha, who was commanding the Arab Legion, and his two other remaining British assistants on 1 March 1956. This date is still commemorated in Jordan today as the day of the Arabization of the Army. The decision was
very popular, and the fervour propelled Hussein to call for new elections, which were held on 21 of October of that year.

Perhaps what the young King did not expect was the opposition sweeping to victory, with the National Socialist Party (NSP) gaining the biggest majority of any political party. Yet, for the first - and only - time in Jordan’s history so far, the King asked Suleiman Nabulsi, party leader of the NSP, to form a government. Hussein even continued to follow nationalist sentiment when he backed Nasser in the Suez crisis, and agreed to the termination of the Anglo-Jordanian Treaty. Jordan then signed the Arab Solidarity Agreement in January 1957 with Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Syria (who collectively pledged to cover the British subsidies the Jordanian budget depended so heavily on).

But this flirtation with parliamentary government was not to last. Of the three states, only Saudi Arabia delivered on its first pledged payment, and Hussein found himself searching for new beneficiaries. This was at the same time the United States was unveiling the Eisenhower Doctrine offering assistance to countries as a measure of curbing Soviet influence. The young Hussein abruptly ended Jordan’s short lived romance with Nasserism and began delivering anti-Communist speeches and seizing Communist material and publications. At the same time PM Nabulsi was announcing his intention to recognise China and attain diplomatic relations with the USSR. The discrepancy could not, possibly, endure. Thus, the King dismissed the country’s first parliamentary government on 10 April 1957, an experiment that was never to be tested again.

Nasser’s sympathisers would attempt two last challenges to the King’s sovereignty. On 13 April 1957 (three days after dismissing the Nabulsi cabinet) a group of army troops who called themselves the free officer’s movement ‘revolted’ at an army base in the city of Zarqa. King Hussein swiftly arrived and, in person, challenged the officers responsible for the uprising while voicing support and appreciation to the troops who had grappled against them. To the King, it was an opportunity to weed-out all Nasserites from his army and maintain troops whose loyalty was not subject to questioning.

A little more than a week later, on 22 April 1957, a ‘Patriotic Congress’ was declared in Nablus by the supporters of the NSP, the Ba’thists and the Communists offering the prospect of a parallel government. They called for establishing a federation with Egypt and Syria and
mounted demonstrations against the state, particularly in Jericho and Nablus. Chaos returned once again to the streets of Jordan and public order broke down. The Bedouin troops and the Muslim Brotherhood (ideologically opposed to the Communists) rallied behind the King, the former tearing down posters of Nasser in the streets of Amman. Finally, on 25 April 1957 the King declared martial law, dissolved and banned political parties (and their publication houses) and arrested hundreds of MPs and activists (Robins 2004: 99-101). Jordan’s flirtation with parliamentary government was over.

**Martial Law and the events leading up to ‘Black September’**

While the 30s left the Transjordanians feeling excluded from official positions they felt privy to, the 50s marked the increasing marginalisation of the Arab Palestinians now officially part of the Jordanian state; this exclusion manifested economically (see Migdal 1980: 39 on favouring businesses and industries located East of the river), culturally (Ashrawi 1996: 23 describes how the identity Palestinian became a “taboo” that can only be whispered at home) and socially in the education system (Nasser 2004: 231 finds no reference to the population of the West Bank as Palestinians in the 1962 government textbooks). However, the increasingly marginalised Palestinians, due to the banning of political parties and the declaration of martial law, were unable to organise and protest through legal-political means.

Attempts to ameliorate Palestinian ‘otherness’ can be found in PM Wasfi al-Tall’s cabinet; the reformist PM’s cabinet included as many Palestinians as it did Transjordanians and a Palestinian lawyer was appointed as Interior Minister. However, as revolutions erupted in Syria and Iraq, creating a tri-nationalist block around Jordan, the King felt little choice but to once more warm to Nasser in Egypt. Al-Tall resigned (he was opposed to Nasserite policies) and soon after King Hussein, in response to pressure by Egypt, agreed to the creation of a movement for the liberation of Palestine. The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) quickly became the outlet of Palestinian nationalism, establishing its own flag and anthem all the while operating from within Jordan.

From this point on, social tension becomes palpable within the Jordanian state. The PLO started to train military forces in Jordan and to enforce a 5% tax on all Palestinian-Jordanians (see Lucas 2008: 283). They also began to exhibit increasingly mafia-like behaviour, creating
roadblocks and publicly displaying their weaponry. Still, in May 1967 King Hussein travelled to Cairo and signed a Joint Defence Agreement with Nasser, practically allowing Egyptian control over Jordanian troops. And so it was an Egyptian commander who on June 5th 1967 ordered Jordanian troops to enter battle against Israel. Infamous for its brevity, the six day war left the Jordanian army – a proud national institution and emblem of Jordanian statehood and stability – shaken and weak. In its aftermath, Jordan lost the West Bank of Palestine, which King Abdullah I had fought hard to secure, to Israel, and a brutal military occupation was instated that continues to this day.

Domestically, the aftermath of the war saw Jordan fall hostage to lawlessness as the radical Palestinian *fida’yeen* [guerrilla fighters], more confident and nonchalant, began to clash with Jordanian security forces (in July of the same year they seized a police station in Jabal al-Ashrafiyeh). A ‘state within a state’ began to materialise as the *feda’yeen* established their own tribunals, prisons, and even education, welfare and health services (Nevo 2008: 221). On 15 September 1970 they set up a parallel government in Irbid and in so doing posited an alternative sovereignty to that of the Jordanian state. The Jordanian response was swift; the army was brought in and direct confrontation continued for around a fortnight, but it would take a further ten months for the guerrilla fighters to be completely weeded out of Jordanian land.

By July 1971, the PLO had forcibly relocated to Lebanon and calm was restored. One of the most contentious episodes in Jordanian history, however, remains far from conclusive. Such inconclusiveness manifests on two interrelated fronts: whether or not the events constituted a civil war (and as follows, how they should be referred to), and whether or not identity divisions were the prime instigator of unrest. To elaborate, while journalists, politicians and academics refer to the events of September 1970 and what followed as a civil war (an argument that builds on Massad’s identity divisions; see Massad 2001: 240), Joseph Nevo reveals that the perpetrators themselves – the Jordanian state and the *feda’yeen* organisations – refuse to define the hostilities as such (Nevo 2008: 226-228). In addition, there appears a correlation between those who perceive of Black September as a Jordanian-Palestinian confrontation and consider it a civil war, and those that dismiss the ethnic-element of the clashes and refuse the civil war characterization (Nevo 2008: 227).

Post-Black September, and throughout most of the 70s,
“a complex system of royal decrees, regional military governors, and special security courts came to provide much of the administrative and judicial framework of the Jordanian political system” (Brynen 1998: 74).

Parliament was called back in 1976 but only to postpone elections indefinitely. At the Arab League summit of Rabat in 1974 the Arab states passed a resolution recognising the PLO as the “sole-legitimate representative of the Palestinians” (Muasher 2008: 19). Military rule remained in place. In many respects, Jordan spent almost a decade coming to terms with the loss of the West Bank in 1967 and the blackness of the months following September 1970. On 30 July 1988 King Hussein dismissed parliament and on the very next day he announced that all legal and administrative ties with the West Bank were to be severed. This included, among other things, West Bank citizens losing their rights of citizenship, terminating the employment of over 20,000 civil servants in the West Bank, scrapping the development plan and downgrading the ministry of occupied territories affairs (Robins 2004: 163). It is important to note, however, that Jordanians of Palestinian origin living on the East Bank were not affected; they retained their full rights of citizenship and were referred to by the King in the disengagement speech as “an integral part” of the Jordanian state (cited in Muasher 2008: 27).

The decision to disengage was, naturally, shrewd in controversy. To Robins, it was “impulsive” and “poorly thought through” (2004: 163). The author maintains that by handing the PLO a “poisoned chalice” the King’s intention was to improve his position in the West Bank by means of revealing the incompetency of the PLO. Robins also notes, however, that the move may have been a defensive measure aimed at preventing West Bankers from “gravitating Eastwood” at a time when the Israeli right was becoming more vocal about its ‘Jordan is Palestine’ proposition. In 1982 Yitzhak Shamir, soon to become Israeli PM, published an article in Foreign Affairs proposing that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict can be ‘solved’ by allowing the Palestinian takeover of Jordan, since Jordan was Palestinian ‘in everything but name’ (cited in Muasher 2008: 21). Such historically and demographically inaccurate claims were accompanied by a vicious settlement policy by the Likud government of Menachim Begin, further appropriating Palestinian land and forcefully driving more Palestinians out of their homes.

Muasher thus views the decision to disengage from the West Bank as a calculated, strategic move. To the Israeli state, the disengagement was a clear message that Jordan did not represent the Palestinians, negating the ‘Jordan is Palestine’ option invalid. To the PLO it was an equally clear message that the organization would have to make its own decisions and bear their
consequences; they wouldn’t be able to “pass the buck to Jordan when and if things went wrong” (2008: 23).

The debate over what the disengagement has meant for Jordanian national identity is still ripe. Muasher maintains that, among those who supported the disengagement, are two camps: the first is made up of those eager to enforce the state’s ‘Jordanianness’ which they believe was diluted by the presence of Jordanians of Palestinian origin. This first camp sought to encourage Palestinians to move back to the West Bank wherever possible. The second camp also believed that the disengagement was beneficial in terms of identifying who lives in Jordan and who lives in Palestine territorially, but they hoped to realise a Jordan inclusive of its all citizens regardless of their origin, including the engagement of the ethnic element of Palestinianness. The latter group, Muasher continues, were aware that the Jordanian-Palestinian relationship had grown more complex at every level: social, economic and familial (2008: 26-27).

With no end in sight to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and the issue of refugees continuing to thwart peace negotiations, Jordan’s national identity is set to remain a contentious issue for the foreseeable future. Some commentators claim the Jordanian-Palestinian identity divisions are the most pressing issue facing the Jordanian state today, capable, in fact, of tearing its very fabric of stability. Many from the political establishment thus actively endorse the silencing of debate on the issue, believing that talking about it would be adding fuel to fire.

It would be a mistake, however, to ignore the complex ways in which Palestinian-Jordanians are in fact established and integrated into Jordan; many private businesses are owned and operated by Palestinian families, and inter-marriage is not uncommon. As such, Muasher is correct to point to the Palestinians ‘social, economic and familial’ integration; what he fails to mention, however, is their continued political marginalisation, more alarming in light of their commitment to be an active, developmental force in Jordan. Palestinian-Jordanians are still not adequately represented in the army, the security services or governmental institutions. Such posts, and their lucrative benefits, are almost exclusively Transjordanian. Thus, the de-facto mute mode on the debate, whilst quelling radical voices on both sides, also mitigates social and economic inequalities within Jordanian society.
Chapter II: Jordan – a narrative of nationhood

Political liberalization, political Islam and the politics of accommodation

In 1980, the United States terminated its economic package to Jordan after the King refused to join Egypt in signing a peace treaty with Israel (Choucair 2006: 6). Jordan became increasingly dependent on Gulf aid as well as remittances from Jordanians working in the Gulf to sustain its economy; this revenue was used to buoy the economy, to support state expenditure and to maintain a large public sector. However, by the late 1980s, Jordan’s slowly emerging debt crisis was reaching a detrimental point. The decline in oil prices meant that financial pledges from Gulf countries were not met (dropping from $1,256 million in 1981 to $427 million in 1988) (Brynen 1998: 81) and remittances from Jordanians working abroad dropped from over $1 billion in 1987 to $623 million in 1989 (Robinson 1998: 390). With many Jordanians returning from the Gulf unemployment was on the rise and per capita GNP dropped from $2000 in 1985 to less than $1500 in 1989; the budget was running constant deficits, the value of the Jordanian dinar plummeted and real estate earnings were also in decline (ibid.). By 1988 the country’s external public debt – at $9.8 billion – was twice Jordan’s GDP. With the situation set to worsen, the government turned to the IMF at the end of 1988 and agreed to a structural-adjustment agreement.

As per the government’s agreement with the IMF, the state was to undercut government spending, including subsidies, and increase government revenue through tax hikes. One immediate effect of the IMF provisions was a sharp increase in the price of cooking gas, gasoline, diesel and kerosene as well as beverages and cigarettes, announced by the government on 16 April 1989 (Brynen 1998: 81).

Two days later riots broke out in the southern town of Ma’an, quickly spreading to al-Karak, al-Tafilah and al-Salt. For the first time since the early formation of the state, the challenge to the political centre came from East bank and Bedouin citizens, long the receivers of subsidies and other types of welfare payments (“staples of Hashemite patronage” to constituencies in the south (ibid. 391)). The rioters demanded a revocation of the tax hikes and the resignation of the government; when the politicised unions joined in they also demanded greater political freedom. In response to the riots, which had killed eight people so far, the King called for national parliamentary elections (22 years after the last ones; 1967).
Political parties remained illegal, and martial law was still in place, but the three week campaign period preceding the November 1989 elections saw the 650 candidates publicising their ideological positions openly. With the West Bank seats removed, the candidates competed for 80 seats divided among 12 governorates, with the number of allocated seats differing from one governorate to the next. Voter turnout was low; only 54% of registered voters (41% of eligible voters) cast their votes (Robinson 1998: 392). The elections were a sweeping victory for the country’s Islamists, who emerged as the biggest bloc in parliament with 32 of the 80 seats (20 Muslim Brotherhood (MB) members and 12 independent Islamists); tribal leaders and ‘centrist’ figures, who ran as independents (on personal platforms not ideological ones) won 35 seats, and the leftists and nationalists won the remaining 13 seats.

Momentum continued to build following the elections with the newly appointed PM Mudar Badran releasing political prisoners, rescinding writing bans on some of Jordan’s journalists, relaxing control of the press and removing the ban on the writers association (Robins 2004: 172). In 1991, The King assigned 60 prominent Jordanian figures, representing a myriad of Jordan’s political forces, both from the ranks of his supporters and the opposition, including Islamists, leftists and nationalists, to draw up a National Charter outlining the Jordanian vision for political liberalization and the steps needed to get there. In many ways, the commission was a reinvention of Wasfi al-Tall’s National Union, which aimed to ameliorate political tension by the politics of accommodation, thereby inviting the opposition to become part of the centre.

The Charter was progressive in demanding greater political freedoms, including the re-legalization of Jordan’s political parties (which materialised in 1992 albeit under a new political parties law that set constraints on foreign funding of parties), the lifting of martial law (which followed in July) and the relaxation of the country’s press laws (a new Press and Publications Law was subsequently passed in 1993 which loosened government control on print media and allowed the publication of new newspapers). The National Charter also maintained the recognition of the hereditary monarchy alongside parliamentary government as the basis of Jordanian rule. By so doing, Lucas argues that the monarchy not only consolidated its position alongside its opposition, but it also proposed a new criteria for national unity based on “civic Hashemite nationalism” instead of “primordial ethnic factors” (2008: 290). He continues to note that this new form of national unity remains “paper thin and subject to de-legitimation based on political performance” (ibid.).
PM Mudar Badran was also keen on including Islamists in his cabinet, and negotiations were initiated between the Muslim brotherhood and the premier. However, after stalling on part of the movement, Badran appointed three independent Islamists to his cabinet. In his next cabinet reshuffle the PM appointed 4 deputies from the Muslim Brotherhood, one of whom assumed the post of Minister of Education. More than anything, the Islamists political success was a demonstration of the advantages of working ‘within the system’; unlike the nationalists in the 50s and the Palestinian factions in the late 60s, the Muslim Brotherhood had never challenged the power structure in Jordanian society, instead choosing to focus on socio-political issues they deemed ‘un-Islamic’ within Jordanian society. Thus, they were not affected by the ban on political parties, being seen as primarily a social and cultural institution, and the Muslim Brotherhood were allowed to continue operating in the country when all other opposition groups were silenced. To the King, they “represented a useful and loyal counterweight to the challenge posed by Arab nationalism and Palestinian nationalist movements” (Brynen 1998: 86). Accommodating the system that accommodated them allowed the MB to go from acquiring 4 seats in the 1954 election, to acquiring 5 times that number in 1989.

The Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood, unlike perhaps its regional counterparts in Morocco and Palestine, had been a “trendsetter for its Arab counterparts” in its emphasis on political reform (Brown 2006: 9). After the Political Parties Law of 1992 was formed, the Muslim Brotherhood established a new political party, the Islamic Action Front (IAF), to act as the political wing of the movement. Today, it is the only viable opposition party in government and perhaps the “most democratic party in the region in terms of its internal operations” (ibid. 3). In a region where political movements revolve around established figures, the IAF members elect their party leaders, and there is regular turnover in the top positions (ibid. 6). Also, whilst firmly dedicated to the values of Shari’a, the Muslim Brotherhood’s approach has been one of “gradualism and persuasion rather than radical and imposed change” (ibid. 10), although divisions within the party, as will be discussed further on, abound.

Therefore, the process of political liberalization following the April 1989 riots was successful in incorporating greater freedom into Jordan’s long-stagnant political life; parliamentary life was resumed, political parties legalised and press control was significantly loosened. Yet, the process of political liberalization also saw the continuation and incorporation of the politics of accommodation as a staple of Jordanian statehood. Stability was reinstated, and the IMF treaty ratified by the elected parliament. However, when the Minister of Education
announced his intention to segregate the sexes in all schools and government departments, King Hussein dismissed parliament.

It is worth noting that not all accounts of Jordan’s return to political life place the same emphasis on the riots of April 1989. Brynen explains that the establishment view holds that liberalization was “both overdue and necessary” and that the circumstances that legitimated the suspension of parliament, such as the 1967 war, Black September and the 1974 Rabat summit, had passed and stability re-established in the kingdom. The 1988 decision to disengage from the West Bank made the time ‘ripe’ for political liberalization (1998: 80). The consensus view, however, holds that Jordan’s process of political liberalization was in effect a series of preemptive measures that aimed to ensure the political survival of the monarchy. Robinson calls this a process of “defensive democratization” which actually maintains the dominant political order and power structure in return for ‘manageable’ political freedoms (1998: 389). Milton-Edwards argues that Jordan post-1989 still submitted to Finer’s 1970 evaluation of the country as a “façade democracy…[where] it is the palace that rules from behind the manipulated democratic forms” (cited in Milton-Edwards 1993: 192).

It is also worth pointing out that the process of political liberalisation Jordan embarked on between 1989 and 2003 occurred at the same time of the first Gulf War. Officially Jordan proclaimed a neutral position but was largely seen to support its Iraqi neighbour, and economic partner, during the offensive. It was a position Jordan paid very heavily for, both in terms of further aid cuts from the US and Gulf States, as well as Jordan’s standing in the international arena. Yet, the official position of the state was in effect representative of widespread popular opinion in Jordan, whose citizens were vocal about their rejection of Western, and particularly American, interference in Arabic affairs. The political liberalization process of the early 90s facilitated a consensus based position with regard to foreign policy, albeit one that proved detrimental to the national interest on the long run. The Jordanian-Israeli ‘peace’ treaty, however, proved a trendsetter of a different sort.

**De-liberalisation, marginalisation of the Islamists, and the evasive peace**

Still suffering from the effects of its financial crisis and the consequences of its position during the Gulf War, and encouraged by the 1991 Madrid peace conference between the Israelis
and Palestinians, King Hussein “publicly sought debt reduction, foreign aid, and foreign investments for Jordan as a reward for signing a peace treaty with Israel” (Choucair 2006: 7). In addition to restoring good relations with the United States and renewing its aid assistance, the king believed a peace treaty with Israel would neutralize the ‘Jordan is Palestine’ proponents in the Israeli government and improve Jordan’s international stature once again (ibid.). The fact remained, however, that the prospect of a peace treaty with Israel was deeply unpopular with Jordanian public opinion.

Any peace treaty signed had to be ratified by parliament. Thus, after dismissing the 11th house of parliament (in response to the Islamist’s intention of segregating sexes in government departments and schools), the King introduced a ‘temporary’ election law, commonly referred to as the ‘one person one vote law’. Under the previous law citizens could cast as many votes as the seats allocated their constituency; so if their constituency was represented by four parliamentary seats, they could vote for four candidates. Under the 1993 elections, however, they could only vote for one candidate. Thus, whereas previously Jordanian citizens could vote according to tribal loyalties as well as ideological positions, the 1993 electoral law forced voters to choose between both. Under such circumstances, the November 1993 elections saw many Jordanians vote for the former, and the IAF suffered a significant defeat. Of the 36 candidates it fielded, only 16 successfully won parliamentary seats. The consequences of the ‘one person one vote’ formula were further exacerbated by the gerrymandering of electoral districts, with tribal and rural constituencies heavily favoured at the expense of Jordan’s urban centres. To Robinson, this represented an attempt to “engineer a docile Parliament” (1998: 397), and successfully so. The elections were a conservative victory and a successful attempt at marginalising the Islamists; their efforts towards preventing the Jordanian-Israeli peace treaty (by forming a coalition with the leftists, nationalists and communists) failed, and the treaty was ratified by parliament by a vote of 55 to 23.

Following the ratification of the treaty, several ‘unsupportive’ mosque preachers were fired and street demonstrations were banned (several clashes with protestors voicing their objections to normalization with Israel ensued) and prominent opposition figures were arrested (and then pardoned 48 hours later; a “show” with “a clear warning to Jordanians – and to the Islamists in particular – that democratization has its limits” (ibid. 403)). Following riots over the increase in bread prices in August 1996 five journalists were arrested on charges of ‘inciting sedition’. In fact, following the signing of the peace treaty, 62 prosecutions of tabloids and
weekly papers were brought forward by the state (Jones 2002: 182). In 1997 the King issued, by
decree, a new press and publications law that revoked many of the liberalizing provisions of the
previous (1993) law; namely, censorship was tightened (the number of topics journalists were
‘discouraged’ from covering was expanded) and stringent new capital requirements for
newspapers made it very difficult for many tabloids and weekly papers to remain in operation,
effectively shutting most of them down (ibid. 182-183). It was under such circumstances that
the IAF, alongside 9 smaller political parties, decided to boycott the 1997 elections to protest
the “overstepping of the constitution, infringement on public freedoms, authoritarianism,
unilateral decision-making, and a retreat from democracy” (cited in Brynen 1998: 92). The
result, once again, was a parliament heavily represented by tribal and conservative figures; the
Islamists were effectively marginalised and the relationship of political accommodation between
the state and its opposition was at its weakest point.

Despite the public opposition to the peace treaty, its rewards to the Jordanian state
have been considerable. Jordan has since been declared a major non-NATO strategic ally, its
debt has been written off, it has signed a partnership agreement with the European Union, and
the state is now the fourth largest recipient of US aid worldwide (Choucair 2006: 8). Yet, the
treaty remains incredibly unpopular in Jordan, and the IAF continues to call for its revocation.
However, divisions within the party, representative of those within the Muslim Brotherhood
itself, disagree over the language and extent of the rejection of the ‘peace’ treaty (see Brown
2006 and Robinson 1998 for discussion of social Islamists and political Islamists in Jordan). It
was thus an uneasy balancing act that King Abdullah II inherited when he succeeded his father
to the throne of Jordan following the monarch’s death in 1999.

Abdullah II’s first priority has been economic reform; within a couple of years of his
succession, Jordan had gained entry into the World Trade Organisation, signed a Free Trade
Agreement with the US, established Qualified industrial Zones (QIZs) to encourage an export
economy, and created a Special Economic Zone in the port city of Aqaba. Yet, such earnest
economic reform has been accompanied by significant reversals in political freedoms; Abdullah’s
first PM was a conservative traditionalist, his second was a businessman who actively privatised
public industries but did little to further political openings. In fact, elections meant for 2001
were postponed several times, and did not take place until 2003. In the two year suspension of
parliament, hundreds of emergency laws were issued which tightened restrictions on public
rallies, introduced further limitations to the press and set to control Jordan’s professional
associations which have become increasingly politicised over the years and are now the main vehicle through which anti-normalization opinions are expressed.

One reason, of course, may be the rationale that Jordan’s development has been caught up in crisis-management. The first few years of Abdullah’s rule, after all, have also witnessed the breakdown of the Israeli-Palestinian peace track, the eruption of the second Palestinian Intifada, the second Gulf War and the orchestrated suicide attacks that hit the capital Amman in November 2005. As such, Jordan’s development has had to react and respond to external environments, in effect derailing its progression and development. HRH Basma Bint Talal, the King’s aunt (and sister to the late King Hussein), explains in her study of NGOs and development in Jordan that,

“Compounding the country’s vulnerability to regional fluctuations and its limited resource base has been the rapid population increase, largely perpetuated by the demographic consequences of regional upheavals. The country’s heavy reliance on foreign aid necessitated by these factors has given rise to the political realignments noted at different junctures. Such shifts have, however, left it vulnerable to reactions of varying intensity, both internally, and at regional and international levels. At the same time, the positions it has adopted in certain situations have meant that it has had to withstand the effects of political conditionality” (2004: 92)

Furthermore, whilst undoubtedly slow, many commentators argue that Jordan’s ‘experiment’ with political liberalization shows “remarkable durability...despite substantial slowdown and reversal” (Brynen 1998: 93). Brynen holds that Jordan’s proven capacity of accommodating change between the monarchy and elected institutions, as well as between state and society, might in the future prove to be an interesting model for monarchical states, particularly in the Arab world;

“In this sense, the regional political importance of Jordan will prove to be – as it has so often in the past – something much greater than the small kingdom itself.” (ibid.)

The 2003 elections, which were held under the same controversial electoral law introduced in 1993, saw the Islamists regain their presence (17 out of the 30 candidates they fielded were successful). They had boycotted the 1997 elections in protest of the said election
law, but “the leadership of the IAF eventually realized that by operating outside parliament it lost rather than gained leverage” (Choucair 2006: 14). In 2005, King Abdullah appointed a committee to produce a new “National Agenda”. Like its paternal “National Charter” and al-Tall’s “National Union” it was meant to produce a consensus-based approach to Jordanian reform (political, economic and social). Even among appointed members, however, “all hell broke loose” when discussions over Jordan’s electoral law began (Muasher 2008: 250). Unable to reach an agreement, committee members decided to adopt a compromise and advocate a law that would assign a portion of the seats to districts (in their current structures) and assign a number of seats to party lists in order to guarantee the representation of the political ideologies. The portion of seats assigned each was not determined, and left to the government to decide (ibid. 251). This ‘accommodation’ would not have resolved the controversies underlying gerrymandering of election districts, but it was not adopted or applied to the 2007 elections either. The establishment of a Ministry for Political Development and the introduction of a new Political Parties Law did little to improve the standing of political parties in Jordan; the 2007 elections, on which this study is based, saw only six IAF candidates successfully gain seats in parliament. No other political party succeeded in their bids. The result, as is elaborated on in Chapter V, is an ideologically-desolate parliament unlikely to push for political reform.

The domestic public sphere

Building on the above events that have shaped recent Jordanian history, Marc Lynch projects that Jordan’s behaviour since the severing of ties with the West Bank (1988) needs to be understood primarily as a result of contestation between state interests and identity, within what he describes as a Jordanian public sphere. Writing from the perspective of political science, Lynch argues that understanding Jordan’s behaviour in the decade following the severing of ties from the framework of public sphere theory contributes significantly to rationalist and constructivist arguments that can only partially explain Jordan’s behaviour. Conceiving of public spheres within non-democratic contexts, to Lynch, needs to account for the centrality of power and the place of ‘strategic interactions’ within the public sphere (and its concern with “proxies for communication such as signalling, cheap talk, and updating of information” (1999: 3)); he elaborates,
“An approach based on both strategic interaction and communicative action focuses attention on dialogue, deliberation, and persuasion without slighting the centrality of power and interest in political behaviour” (ibid.).

Lynch uses three main events to make his argument: the severing of the ties with the West Bank, the first Gulf war and the signing of the ‘peace’ treaty with Israel. Beginning with the severing of the ties, Lynch argues that the decision was only possible after consensus was reached across the domestic Jordanian as well as transnational Arabic public spheres; the latter was achieved through securing Arab consensus and the former following the contestation of the (at the time) current Jordanian identity and the ensuing institutionalisation of a new one. This deliberative struggle, to Lynch, manifested over a number of weeks prior to the final decision, and included both a “public interpretative struggle” and series of meetings between Jordanian officials with PLO and other Arab counterparts (ibid. 98-99). However, Lynch notes that the public spheres through which consensus was developed (particularly the domestic one) were not rational-deliberative as envisioned under normative conceptualisations of the public sphere, but included “exclusivist narratives” that “increasingly set the terms of debate” (1999: 105). Such protagonists did encounter opposition, including from King Hussein himself, who advocated an “inclusionary, identity-blind discourse” (ibid.). Yet, Lynch insists that the Jordanian “chauvinists” “held the upper hand in the politicization of identity...at the expense of any form of mobilization based either on Palestinian identity or on claims blind to identity” (ibid.). Thus, while the public sphere was successful in consolidating consensus on policy (that supported the severing of the ties) it was unable to consolidate a consensus on sociality (the identity of the Jordanian public sphere) (1999: 127).

At the critical point of the severing of the ties with the West Bank, the Jordanian press played an important part in shaping identity discourse within the domestic public sphere. Debates surrounding the Jordanian-Palestinian identity of the public sphere came to dominate press content, crossing previously “non-crossable” red lines. Much of the debate was not within the tradition of “responsibility” advocated by the liberalized 1993 Press and Publications Law; the weekly press that flourished following its passing overtly used “identity politics” to sell copies. Yet, whilst doing so, they simultaneously “aggressively” expanded the bounds of national discourse (Lynch 1999: 126-127). As usual, this meant that exclusivists and extremists were the first to take advantage of this new emergent space; “for the first time in the history of the Jordanian press there appear hateful essays trying to arouse hatred and envy” (Masri and
Jordanians thus started to question the benefit of a liberalised press and its capacity to produce a healthy national consensus on identity, especially when “debate seemed to be polarizing positions and exacerbating problems” (ibid.).

The second case study Lynch raises is Jordan’s behaviour during the first Gulf war, described by the state as “neutral” but understood, especially by the US administration at the time, as siding with Iraq. Eventually, Jordan paid handsomely for its position during the war; the suspension of American aid amid a severe financial crisis added to worsening economic woes. This has led many to argue that the sole explanation for Jordan’s position was its compliance with popular domestic sentiments, largely characterised as pro-Saddam. Lynch, however, contests this view and argues that the domestic public sphere’s response to the first Gulf war was not a result of ethnically prescribed loyalties but rather a result of contestation and the articulation of an identity frame that asserted a shared Jordanian-Iraqi identity based on mutual interest as well as wider Arab identification. Lynch notes that the war was seen to target not just Iraq, but also Arab sovereignty, which explains both the domestic consensus on the war and the official state attempts at hiwar (debate) and conciliation between Arab states without the need for foreign intervention (1999: 158-160). Thus, the consensus view advocated addressing the Iraqi-Kuwaiti troubles as a regional issue, and dealing with it accordingly; in this view, Jordan’s position was not a result of ‘blind’ support for Saddam among the Palestinian-Jordanians.

Lynch does point out that it is important to realise the ways in which “consensus” masks the diversity of reactions that emerged in response to the invasion, particularly in its initial stages. “Consensus” was a barrier to ‘rational’ debate; even when decisions were public-driven, they became authoritarian and “enforced”. This manifested in the practice of publicly humiliating commentators who disagreed with the “consensus” view, and there were no visible attempts of deliberating across difference. Yet, Lynch insists that the pressure to conform to the consensus view “should not obscure the initial process of opinion formation...and the reality of competing frames within a relatively open public sphere” (1999: 161-164).

However, the Jordanian public sphere became an “issue” in itself as the Jordanian state was preparing to sign a peace treaty with Israel. Lynch notes that contrary to the King’s assertions that there was a national Jordanian consensus for peace, the treaty faced much public opposition. Thus, the “perceived need to maintain the appearance of [consensus] drove
the repression of the public sphere” (1999: 191). This shifted the public sphere into “defensive mode” and the political public found itself having to defend its very legitimacy as a public. Lynch goes on to argue that “participation” was replaced with “loyalty” as the staple of belonging (intima’) and upholding Jordan’s identity. Yet, at the same time, shifting the Jordanian-Israeli relations from the private (where they had been couched for decades) to the public made state policy legitimate ground for public scrutiny (1999: 191-197). Following the treaty, the Jordanian state increasingly viewed the domestic public sphere as a “hostile entity, to be engaged in strategic battle, rather than a partner in deliberation” (Lynch 1999: 246). Trends following this suppression, such as the impotence of parliament (following the “one vote” law), the harassment of the press, the ‘drift’ from Iraq and the economic problems facing the country, culminated, to Lynch, to the rioting of 1996 (ibid. 250).

Thus, Lynch’s investigation of three major events in recent Jordanian history (the severing of the ties with the West Bank, the first Gulf war and the Jordanian-Israeli ‘peace’ treaty) exhibit processes of identity contestation and consensus formation that, at times, influenced state interests and behaviour. Lynch argues that these processes contribute to a domestic public sphere. He also posits that when the Jordanian public sphere was open and accessible, contestations around issues of national identity were most clearly contested, consolidated and resolved. However, when the public sphere was repressed, national identity contestation assumed a polarizing, rather than a deliberating, role and this furthered a sense of instability. Yet, even in the face of state repression, Lynch insists that public dialogue has proved resilient in face of state power.

Ji-Hyang Jang, on the other hand, argues that both civil society as well as the state are weak in Jordan:

“...the state is weak due to the excessively high level of immersion into the particular social groups through patronage networks while civil society is also weak owing to the high level of submissive attitudes toward the state” (2009: 81).

Jang continues to characterise civil society in Jordan as “corporatist” rather than “plural”, which allows recognition of the interventionist role of the state in civil society ‘associations’ (“The state both reacts to social forces and shapes the direction of those forces, in turn” (ibid. 83). These associations, to Jang, include the familial, communitarian, moral and organic groupings which
tend to be singular, compulsory, non-competitive, hierarchically-ordered and functionally differentiated units (*ibid.* 82-83).

However, Jang’s analysis of Jordanian civil society, as it conforms to normative ideals, fails to recognise the ways in which pluralism continues to survive and, at times, bears influence on public policy through the mechanisms of the domestic public sphere. Lynch’s account of Jordanian public spheres from a political science perspective, by accounting for arguments in the press and associating them with state behaviour, offers an interesting argument for the ways that public spheres do in fact exist within Arabic societies, even if their functioning is far from the normative ideal. This thesis aims to correspond to such an attempt, but from the transdisciplinary field of social science. As noted in the Introduction, the aim is to explore the very ‘publicness’ of apparent public spheres across two domains: the mediated and the performed. This largely means that the principle interest is in the ways in which citizens actually participate, or are portrayed as participating, within those public spheres. It is hoped that such an approach will also inform existing discussions on Jordan’s history, statehood and identity.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has attempted to provide a narrative of the influences that shape Jordanian public spheres. Jordanian public spheres are thus understood as situated within Arabic public spheres, which in turn are situated within wider universal concepts, or at least, vis-à-vis Western public spheres, actual and normative (Habermasean). Thus, this chapter has advanced a narrative – that remains incomplete and partial – of the transformative meanings of nationhood, identity and publicness in the Jordanian context. It is beyond the capacity of this chapter, or thesis, to claim a historical proficiency. What it aims to do, however, is to advance the fluidity of these concepts (nationhood, identity and publicness) within the Jordanian historical context with the understanding that they have shaped, and continue to shape, what it means to be, and implicitly, to participate in being, Jordanian today. Those concepts (themselves situated and fluid as the narrative has outlined) constitute the parameters of publicness, or the making of publicness, in Jordan.

Muasher maintains that two main pseudo-political groups continue to hinder the process of reform in Jordanian society, be it economical or political. The first are what he
describes as the ‘old guard’, “a political party in everything but name” (ibid. 249). He explains that they comprise government officials and ex-officials as well as long serving bureaucrats whose main interests lie in maintaining the status quo of Jordanian political culture, where jobs and privileges are the beneficiaries of the elite few. To Muasher, they will continue to challenge the development of a merit-based political culture in the country. The second group are those who consider themselves the “guardians of the state”; having dominated the political scene for so long, they now oppose any widening of the decision-making process on the grounds that politics is “too serious an affair to be administered by the public” (ibid. 247-248). Wealthy businessmen, rather than acting as a force for change, see it in their best interest to maintain the status quo that has allowed them to accrue wealth and power (ibid). While Muasher seems to paint a gloomy picture, he maintains that consensus-based change, even if slow, must be adhered to. He also cautions, however, that political liberalization in the Arab world should not limit itself to talking about majority rule, but also, crucially, about minority rights (ibid. 257). A commitment to diversity, whilst key to all democratic societies, is of special relevance in a country like Jordan. As has been outlined in the beginning of this chapter, the state of Jordan has never had a cohesive national identity, or a single historical trajectory; rather, its historical narrative, up to the present day, is one of ethnic, social and religious diversity. With a reputed half a million Iraqi refugees who have fled the violence in their country settled (legally and illegally) in Jordan during the last couple of years, this trend has not subsided.

The exclusivist trend in the political centre is yet to realise that Jordanian stability has only been possible because of, not in spite of, Jordan’s diversity. Thus, when the King launched his ‘Jordan-First’ initiative, aiming to encourage unity through diversity with an over-arching identity that supersedes ethnic, religious and tribal loyalty, it was not well received. Jordanians of all backgrounds felt that the slogan somehow marginalised them in particular, and rejected the notion that there is one way to be loyal, or one way to be Jordanian.

Jordan’s diversity is often lost in historical accounts of its political progression, and is often reduced to arguments about Jordanian-Palestinian tensions. This chapter falls victim to the same fallacies, by virtue of it being a literature review, and citationary, chapter. Yet, what it does is also maintain that Jordan’s narrative of nationhood, in terms of history, identity and political life, has developed a unique consensus-based approach to public life: the politics of accommodation. At its very best, the politics of accommodation has encouraged the progression of political and public life in Jordan, provided security and stability, and
incorporated Jordan’s diverse peoples into the political centre in a manner unique to all regional neighbours. However, when used to accommodate a certain political group at the expense of others, like the tribal leaders and conservatives who hold the legislative reigns nearly to themselves alone, the politics of accommodation has been detrimental to Jordanian development and has lead to internal strife and social unrest.

It is in this light that this thesis explores the development of public spheres in Jordan. Within the context of parliamentary elections, and between the spaces of political and social mediation in Jordanian society, citizenship and its manifestations remain evasive chapters. Until they are further explored, until issues like public space and public spheres are better understood, no narrative of Jordanian nationhood can be complete. Perhaps that is the most promising aspect of the exploration of public spheres in any society; it ensures that any historical narratives are not merely accounts of state players, as so many Middle Eastern histories sadly are.
Methodological Approaches
Chapter III: Investigating Mediated Citizenship: Jordanian citizens on the news

The widely contested notion of an Arabic public sphere, as discussed in Chapter I, remains relevant for understanding the nuances of public engagement even in the absence of normative criteria that ‘structure’ the public sphere among state and society. Rather than conceive of the public sphere as a predetermined space with established structures, it is understood as a wider process of discourse where persuasion and contestation occur, and transform, in response to arguments, events or actions. The Arabic public sphere therefore accounts not for how ‘consequential’ ‘public opinion’ is (and this is not to say that it does not exert influence at times), but for the ‘socio-’ of civic-political engagement: the ways in which citizens go about participating (or not) and negotiating their exclusion through contestation. The latter form of participation, informed by critiques of Habermas (particularly feminist critiques) is especially relevant to non-democratic contexts like the Arab world.

The aim of this thesis is to contribute to this conceptual understanding of an Arabic public sphere, and it posits to do so specifically by considering the ways through which citizens go about public-sphering in non-democratic contexts. The premise is to uncover the ways in which citizens do participate in the Arabic public sphere, transnationally via the much celebrated news networks, and domestically via civil society happenings. By discovering the ways in which citizens do participate, the thesis hopes to uncover the very ‘publicness’ of the Arabic public sphere, in its mediated and cultural manifestations. Both case studies revolve around the November 2007 parliamentary elections in Jordan; the first examines the news coverage of the elections across four transnational broadcasters and considers how citizens were included in the coverage and how their inclusion differed across gender. The second case study explores the ways through which Jordanian citizens participated in interactive theatre performances about the elections, covering issues such as participation, female representation and tribal loyalties. This chapter is concerned with the methodological approaches used to explore the mediated representation of citizens on the news; the next chapter considers the research methodologies employed to explore the more performative dimension of participation in cultural public spheres.

This chapter thus begins by discussing some studies that have looked into the portrayal of citizens on the news. It then goes on to explaining the research process through which the
news coverage of the Jordanian elections was monitored, coded and analysed. This included the construction of a “Continuum of Participation” based on similar ways of talking and participating by citizens as they were portrayed on mediated news networks. The ultimate aim of the case study is to uncover the ‘how’ and ‘when’ of citizen participation; the ‘how’ relates to the forms of public participation portrayed in the coverage and the ‘when’ considers aspects of inclusion and exclusion, including when the role of citizens is perceived as ending. In addition, gender is considered as a demographic factor in order to account for differences in the representation of male citizens and female citizens.

Literature and design

Habermas’s rational-deliberative male publics of seventeenth and eighteenth century Western Europe were predominantly coffee-house frequenters whose interactions comprised face-to-face debates. This slowly gave way to the mediated public sphere vis-à-vis a growing and more economically competitive printing press. As societies grew larger and more complex, mass media increasingly substituted the printing press as the new sites of the public sphere. Habermas’s original thesis lamented this development and argued that the market has ‘taken over’ the spaces of public deliberation to such an extent that all publicness has become staged. Habermas later revised his theory to acknowledge the ways in which, at times and in certain circumstances, the public sphere does come to bear influence and affect state policy.

It follows that research into the public sphere has shifted from a bourgeoisie-oriented perspective that values face-to-face critical-rational deliberation, to account for how ‘new forms of political publics’ have emerged that “incorporate mediated publicness” into their everyday lives (Barnett 2003 and Thompson 1995 cited in Higgins 2008: 137). Rather than reduce the mediated public sphere to the formal political system, and the apparently apathetic and ignorant publics it creates, Sonia Livingstone argues that our “contained” conception of the audience needs to be transformed into something more complex that considers how matters of identity and belonging (including inclusion and exclusion) are shaping participation today (2005: 19). Indeed, research that investigates the relationship between the media and the public sphere is yet to conceive an operational definition of what constitutes a public, or when an audience are considered a public.
Thus, in order to understand the relationship between the media and the public sphere, we must first empirically examine the relationship between audiences and the media. This case study is interested in uncovering the dimensions of [mediated] representation, including the ways in which the media position publics. Such research can reveal whether public spheres exist, and crucially, how they are sustained.

As such, Justin Lewis et al’s (2005) groundbreaking study examined the representation of citizens in mainstream news, and the nature of participation portrayed. The authors argued that the portrayal of citizens on the news media shapes what it means to be a citizen in a democracy (2005: 8), even after accounting for how established and institutionalised routines of journalism (what they refer to as the “hierarchy of access” (ibid.9)) focus on the activities of the powerful at the expense of citizen voices. They therefore maintain that, “Although these representations may be the outcome of time-honoured journalistic practices, they can, none the less, convey a profound political message” (2005: 8). Of course, this is not to say that the portrayal of citizens on the news directly affects their perception of themselves in real life, for as Huston et al (1992) point out, the research agenda on media effects remains wide open and needs to be understood within larger social and cultural realities that shape and inform the environments in which television is viewed and the myriad ways in which content is understood (1992: 33-34). However, investigating the portrayal of social groups in the media can tell us about the perceived legitimacy of these groups; to Clark (1972) this manifests in recognition and respect. Recognition is acquired through media presence (being able to identify the social group) while respect is attained through positive or sympathetic portrayals (that allow identification with the social group) (1972 cited in Huston et al 1992: 21-22).

For this purpose, Lewis et al looked specifically at the ways in which publics appear as citizens (rather than victims or eyewitnesses) (2005:11) and the nature of their participation in the news through vox-pops. The authors went on to identify five broad categories of citizen engagement, ranging from ‘citizens making proposals’ as the most active form of participation, to ‘citizens commenting about sports, celebrity and entertainment’ representing the least deliberative form of participation. Other types of engagement included ‘citizens speaking of personal experience as consumers’, ‘citizens commenting on an issue/event/group without making proposals’ and ‘citizens responding to politicians’. The findings of Lewis et al’s research indicate that citizens are often presented as “childlike”, responding emotionally or peripherally
largely as passive observers. “The world of politics, in this sense, tends to be left largely to the politicians and the experts” (2001: 43-49).

Accordingly, rather than facilitate public deliberation as normatively expected of a public sphere, Lewis *et al*’s study finds that the news excluded citizens from real participation, granting them symbolic presence rather than a deliberative voice. The authors then reconsidered their findings with regards to the topic or issue commented on in the citizen vox-pops and they found that when commenting on socio-political issues citizens often speak as “self-interested, depoliticised consumers rather than as engaged citizens”; however, when speaking on issues of sport or celebrity, citizens often expressed substantive opinion and judgement. The authors conclude that “The public appears to have more authority as consumers of pop culture products and individuals than they do as citizens of democratic society” (2005: 84).

Other formats in which citizens appear in the news and which the authors considered in their study is the news coverage of demonstrations in which citizen participation is by default ‘active’. Indeed, Lewis *et al* explain that the purpose of a demonstration is to translate public opinion into pressure on government policies/agencies, thus representing the ideal of participation in the public sphere in democratic society. However, the authors noted that news coverage of demonstrations frequently portrayed the demonstrating public as disruptors of civil society (rather than enablers) who were contrasted to the “silent, law-abiding majority” (2005: 19). This reinforces Wahl-Jorgensen’s (2002) findings on the culture of discrediting the public voice in mainstream print media; by examining the process through which ‘letters to the editor’ are selected for publishing, the author found that citizen letters are often read, by journalists, within an ‘idiom of insanity’. The underlying assumption, she explains, is that only the most deranged, eccentric and outspoken members of the public ‘bother’ to write to a newspaper. As a result, letters that mostly submit to this classification are chosen for publishing (2002 cited in Higgins 2008: 94).

Finally, another form through which citizens appear in the news is the ‘public opinion surveys’, which were critiqued by Lewis (2001) on grounds of constricting citizens from the power of naming their issues and perspectives. Lewis argues that opinion surveys effectively reduce public participation to choosing from a set of ‘loaded’ meanings crafted by those in a position to do so (see *Constructing Public Opinion* 2001).
The importance of empirically investigating the portrayal of citizens in the news is born out of an understanding that the media not merely reflect but also construct our perception of the world around us, including our role as citizens and the nature of our participation. In a study that looks at how different ethnic groups in Greece perceive their representation in the news, Madianou (2005) finds that the Turkish speaking respondents “felt ostracised by a television discourse that systematically misrepresented them” (2005: 109), signalling, to the author, the point at which diversity is translated into withdrawal and exclusion from public life. This finding further attests to the importance of considering how mediated public spheres, even when recognising diversity, still reflect social and cultural inequality and exclusion. This ties once again into feminist critiques of the normative public sphere (in Habermas’s original account) for its failure to elaborate on the exclusion of women from formal participation.

Building on the above studies, and particularly informed by Lewis et al.’s investigation of the portrayal of citizens on the news and Fraser’s critiques on the exclusions that mark the public sphere, this thesis aimed to incorporate these representational debates on mediated publics into discussions of the Arabic public sphere which have, thus far, remained citationary (providing text-based responses with little, if any, empirical explorations). Thus, the purpose and contribution of this research lies in its attempt to explore how citizens are represented in the news, to uncover the nature of their participation, the role they were allocated and the extent to which they were involved in issue-based deliberation on issues of common concern. The study also considers gender as a demographic factor, and notes differences between the representations of women as compared to men on the news. For this end, the news coverage of the November 2007 parliamentary elections in Jordan was monitored over a month’s duration, starting two weeks prior to the elections and ending two weeks after it, across four transnational broadcasters in the region.

In other words, this case study aims to contribute empirically to the understanding of how the subject position ‘citizen’ is produced and portrayed in transnational news coverage in the Arab world and for this purpose two research questions were identified pertaining to the ‘how’ and ‘when’ of citizen participation. By exploring the dimensions of the ‘how’ and ‘when’ of citizen participation the research hopes to further understand the nature of mediated publicness in the Arab world, the role allocated the public in the news, and consequently, to contribute to contained conceptualisations of what it means to participate in an Arabic public sphere. Ultimately, the aim is to examine the apparent publicness of the transnational
broadcasters by identifying the extent, and inherently the limits, imposed on the processes of public deliberation via the mediated public sphere.

The Jordanian parliamentary elections, held on November 20th, 2007, were chosen as a case study for a number of reasons. Firstly, elections are expected, at least in theory, to bring to the forefront issues related to representation, accountability and the public good. In such a manner, news coverage of national elections is the manifestation of the “close link between theories of the public sphere and democratic theory more generally” (Ferree et al 2002: 289). The authors explain that,

“Democratic theory focuses on accountability and responsiveness in the decision-making process; theories of the public sphere focus on the role of public communication in facilitating or hindering this process” (ibid.).

In addition, the choice of a national election, rather than a regional news story, was an attempt to ‘balance out’ trends stipulating that Arabic-language transnational media sidetrack genuine reform by directing attention towards the region’s troubled hot-spots, effectively bypassing daily citizen concerns. Imad Karam (2007), for example, has shown that issues relating to the daily lives of Arab citizens are largely ignored; his research covered al-Jazeera’s three most popular political talk shows over the period of ten weeks, and found that only three out of thirty episodes covered national issues relating to socio-political development or reform (2007: 82).

**Process and theory**

The data sample for the study consisted of the evening bulletins of four Arabic-language transnational networks over a month’s duration, starting two weeks prior to the elections (5 November 2007) and ending two weeks after it (4 December 2007). The news channels selected were chosen to represent the diverse perspectives, influences and political interests present in the Arab world, and followed a classification adopted by Fayed Kazan (1993) that distinguished between local media, regional media and foreign media:

*Local media:* media owned by individuals/institutions in a specific country and directed primarily at the audience of that country. The channel monitored under this category was the Jordanian state-run broadcaster JTV, the only channel allowed to broadcast terrestrially in Jordan. It is also available transnationally via satellite.
Regional media: media owned by Arab individuals/institutions and directed primarily at the Arab world. Under this category, the Qatar based and regionally popular al-Jazeera and its main rival al-Arabiya were monitored.

Foreign media: media owned by non-Arab individuals/institutions and directed at the Arab world (broadcasting in Arabic). The news channel monitored under this category was the US sponsored al-Hurra.

The evening bulletins of al-Jazeera, al-Arabiya and al-Hurra were all recorded privately, beginning two week prior to the elections (on 5 November 2007) and continuing for the duration of a month (ending on 4 December 2007). The coverage of JTV, however, was acquired through the JRTV (Jordan Radio and Television) archives. This was necessary as I lacked the equipment needed to record all four programmes, and none of the other three channels kept archives in their offices in Amman, Jordan. At first, I was denied requests to access the archives, and informed several times that they are not for the public. Even after I explained to the head of news that I would be willing to return and share all results and findings with his team, he still refused to grant me access and insisted the archives were not accessible to the public nor were they available for the benefit of researchers. When I asked what purpose the archives served then, he said that they were retained for special requests by the royal court, including creating montages and clips from footage of national celebrations and ceremonies. I remember explaining that archives can be so much more, as they retain vicissitudes of our national ‘consciousness’, or at the very least, the events that have shaped our history. However, after several meetings and attempts at persuasion, I realised that his ‘logic’ (of closure) made complete sense to him, and he was not going to be convinced otherwise. It seemed my efforts to acquire the required data had come to nothing.

At around the same time I was introduced to Princess Rym al-Ali, a former CNN International correspondent who married into the Jordanian Royal family a few years back. Princess Rym’s daughter attended a nursery where my aunt works, and having shared my agony over the JRTV archives with the entire family, my aunt mentioned my scholarly interest in journalism to her highness when she arrived to pick up her daughter from school (something she did in person on a near daily basis). HRH requested to meet with me, and after an interesting conversation on journalism and communication in the Arab world, I relayed my frustration over the inaccessibility of the JRTV news archives. A couple of hours after leaving the palace I
received a phone call from the head of news (the same one who had refused me access several times) in which I was gently reproached for not telling him I was “well connected”; “If you told me you knew people in the Palace we would have facilitated your request immediately”. The very next day I received recordings of the entire data sample without having to do anything myself. The episode, while frustrating, is another example of the fragility of the official public sphere in Jordan; official publicness, and more specifically the relationship between the state, the public and the local media, remains heavily safeguarded not necessarily by the head of state (here the monarch), but more generally by bureaucracy and a tradition of closure in public governmental institutions.

While not a large sample, it proved a valid timescale because at the very beginning (5 November 2007) and by the end (4 December 2007), the Jordanian elections were not being covered at all. Indeed, Berelson has argued that,

“For most purposes, analysis of a small, carefully chosen sample of the relevant content will produce just as valid results as the analysis of a great deal more – and with the expenditure of much less time and effort” (1971: 174).

As the research aims were to explore the spaces for public participation in the news coverage, and ways in which citizens were portrayed as participating, the case study identified vox-pops across the news coverage and grouped them into four categories: official vox-pops (government employees, MPs), expert vox-pops (including judges, academics, journalists, political analysts, religious figures, civil society activists, businessmen and retired officials), opposition vox-pops (political parties or candidates running for the election and their support groups) and finally citizen vox-pops. It was only the latter group that was used for this case study. Citizen vox-pops were chosen because they serve as indicators of the publicness of transnational media; Lewis et al (2005) explain that,

“Vox-pops’... are there to offer a slice of life, they provide a chance to see what ordinary citizens have to say on a given issue. They are, in this sense, there to represent the ordinary citizen” (2005: 17).

In total, 108 citizen vox-pops were aired during the data sample; all were transcribed on index cards colour coded for gender. The index cards were then thematically grouped around
similar ways of talking and/or addressing issues (the discriminating factor being the level of deliberation to comply with normative conceptualisations of an ideal public sphere as one of critical-rationality). Several different forms of participation emerged, ranging from the active and deliberative (citizens making proposals), to the uncritical (citizens repeating official narrative). All in all, five different forms of participation were identified, and this inductive process culminated in a Continuum of Participation that was differentiated at both ends by the level of deliberation exhibited in the citizen vox-pops. Figure III.a below is an illustration of the continuum.

Figure III.a.: the Continuum of Participation

The construction of the continuum was informed by Lewis et al.’s (2005) research discussed earlier in the chapter. After all citizen vox-pops were transcribed onto index codes, they were coded into SPSS. Content analysis was used to explore patterns of public portrayal on the news and how that differed across gender. The use of SPSS allowed the creation of visual illustrations depicting those patterns, in turn facilitating inferences about the relationship between transnational news media, citizen participation and the mediated public sphere in Arab societies. A discussion of the results and findings is presented in Chapter VI.

Originally, content analysis referred particularly to the method of ‘counting’ clearly quantifiable aspects of text content, such as, for example, number of words per text or space of an article in a newspaper. It has since expanded to include methods that attempt to analyse text content according to syntactic, semantic or pragmatic classifications, including variants of
content analysis that approach texts by means of categories (Titscher, Meyer, Wodak and Vetter 2000: 55). This expansion of the methodology has meant that a qualitative method of content analysis has developed and oriented itself in closer proximity towards ethnographic methods and grounded theory (ibid.).

In 1941, Laswekk described the objectives of content analysis as a process through which raw data is summarised to enable an assessment of 1) the ‘influence’ of media content on an audience, or 2) the impact of ‘control’ upon that content (ibid.57). In 1952 Berelson went on to advocate a quantitative method of content analysis that is ‘objective’ and oriented towards frequency measurements. His classic definition of content analysis describes the method as “a research technique for the objective, systematic and quantitative descriptions of the manifest content of communication” (1971: 18). ‘Manifest’ is a key word, and is seen as crucial to the ‘objective’ and ‘systematic’ features of content analysis. Such notions are informed by understandings of content analysis as a transparent method (see Bryman 2004: 196) and an unobtrusive method (see Beardsworth 1980: 386). It is perhaps for these reasons that content analysis is also said to be ‘atheoretical’ (Bryman 2004: 197).

However, even counting ‘manifest’ features implicitly requires processes of inference. To Deacon, Wring and Golding, the problem with associating manifest features with objectivity is assuming that there is an absolute neutral position that media accounts can advance (2006: 241). Manifest features are as prone to subjective interpretation as are latent features of content. As Beadsworth put it, a researcher,

“...must draw upon his own knowledge as a speaker of the language in question in order to make sense of the material under study and to categorise its various elements” (1980: 386).

As early as 1952 Kracauer argued that confining content analysis to the quantification of manifest features overlooked the qualitative and semantic purpose behind text: meaning. In response to Berelson’s technique, he developed a qualitative approach that used categories to unveil patterns of latent content; Kracauer also considered aspects such as context and constructed meaning (Titscher et al 2000: 62). Kracauer’s contributions, whilst significantly different to Berelson’s application of content analysis, are still understood as a development within the methodology, rather than an independent research tool (ibid.). This has allowed our
understanding of content analysis to expand; Deacon, Pickering, Golding and Murdock (1999) explain that,

“The purpose of content analysis is to quantify salient and manifest features of a large number of texts, and the statistics are used to make broader inferences about the processes and politics of representation” (1999: 116).

This makes it an ideal method for “delineating trends, patterns and absences over large aggregates of texts” (ibid.117). Similarly, to Winston,

“Content analysis remains the only available tool for establishing maps, however faulty, of television output...Without ‘the map’, no case can be sustained as to any kind of cultural skewdness except on the basis of one-off examples of misrepresentation or libel (which are not the norm). And if no case can be made, then there is none to answer” (1990: 62).

Therefore, while no research method can be value free, content analysis is well suited to explore the processes and politics of citizen representation on the news. The initial aims of the case study were to explore the ‘how’ and the ‘when’ of citizen participation, specifically, the role allocated citizens in the news coverage, the forms their representation took, instances of public inclusion and exclusion, and the variation of these forms of portrayal across gender. These aims are thus in fact explorations of patterns, and seek to explore, and reveal, the positioning of citizens in news coverage of national elections. The trends and patterns revealed, as will be discussed in Chapter VI, allow us to draw inferences about the very ‘publicness’ of transnational broadcasters, in turn contributing, empirically, to debates about the Arabic public sphere.

The Continuum of Participation

As noted above, the Continuum of Participation was developed inductively by thematically grouping together similar ways of talking and participating that were portrayed in the news coverage of the elections through the citizen vox-pops aired during the data sample. The process of constructing the continuum therefore relates to the qualitative tradition within content analysis methods, which draw on and is informed by grounded theory (among other qualitative research tools). The final continuum was illustrated above in Figure III.a.
The different levels of deliberation in the continuum can be seen as corresponding to different ‘traditions’ within public sphere theory, as identified by Ferree et al (2002). For example, the two lowest levels of deliberation, ‘citizens repeating official narrative’ and ‘citizens responding individually’ correspond to representative-liberal theories which “…accept the desirability of a public sphere but one in which general public participation is limited and largely indirect” (2002: 290). According to this tradition, citizens are not required to participate in public discourse on policy issues, and in fact, “public life is actually better off if they don’t” (ibid.). As such, the task of deliberation rests with the elected representative who is responsible for articulating citizen frames in the public forum (ibid. 291).

On the other hand, ‘citizens engaging emotionally’ and ‘citizens commenting on issues’ correspond to participatory-liberal traditions which seek to ‘maximise’ the participation of citizens in public decisions that affect their lives (ibid. 295). Participatory-liberal theories encourage citizens to challenge entrenched inequalities, and in so doing require a form of public mobilization so citizens can “recognize and act on their own interests” (ibid. 297). ‘Emotional’ engagement is considered a means of fostering a more inclusive public sphere and indirectly leading, through greater participation, to a more politically competent and knowledgeable public (ibid. 298). Finally, the two highest levels of deliberation in the continuum, ‘citizens commenting on issues’ and ‘citizens making proposals’ can be seen to correspond to the discursive theory of the public sphere, which stipulates the need for a well functioning public sphere to exist alongside the traditional political centre in order to fully deliberate important normative questions (ibid. 300-303). Dialogue is a central component of this tradition, as is the importance of developing well reasoned arguments to back one’s assertions:

“The ultimate goal is a public sphere in which better ideas prevail over weaker ones because of the strength of these ideas rather than the strength of their proponents” (ibid. 301).

While the different modes of participation in the continuum correspond to different theories of the public sphere, this did not dictate the construction of the continuum, which was developed through thematically grouping different ways of talking together. However, once the different ‘modes’ were grouped together, the different theories of the public sphere discussed informed the ‘sequencing’ of the modes of participation from the comment-driven, to the policy-oriented. This was largely in keeping with normative understandings of the public sphere,
as a communicative ideal, and the value it places on rational-critical deliberation. The linearity of the developed model may of course be critiqued. Indeed, many citizens simultaneously referred to two modes of participation in a single vox-pop; for example, repeating official narrative (praising the ‘democratic’ institution) while also outlining public issues they wished parliament to address once elected. In this case, the vox-pop was assigned the ‘higher’ mode of deliberation (citizens commenting on issues). Whilst this may be considered a weakness, and certainly may dilute the diversity of forms of public participation, it was deemed necessary in order to aggregate patterns and general trends of citizen portrayal on the news – which was the primary aim of the case study. Given the dearth of empirical material in the field, prescribing to linear ‘constructs’ in order to explore larger trends and gain insight into the positioning of the ‘citizen’ in the news was the most suitable initial research method.

Thus far, this chapter has described the process of media monitoring and the inductive identification of five modes of public participation in the news coverage of the Jordanian parliamentary elections of November 2007. The ways in which Jordanian citizens participated in the coverage, through vox-pops, was found to extend across five modes of participation, ranging from ‘repeating official narrative’ as the most comment-driven form of talk, through the individualistic and observatory roles (citizens responding individually) as well as emotionally based participation, and finally culminating in ‘citizens commenting on issues’ and ‘citizens making proposals’ as the most deliberative modes of participation portrayed in the news coverage. This empirical approach corresponds to the initial aims, and contribution, of the first case study of this thesis: to empirically investigate the ‘forms’ and ‘extent’ of the publicness of transnational broadcasters in the region. This has been pursued through exploring the spaces afforded the public in the news coverage of a local election.

Chapter V offers a literature review of current debates on the Arabic public sphere; it is hoped this review will illustrate how the dearth of empirical evidence in those debates has thus far prevented the development of a sound theory of the [mediated] Arabic public sphere. In addition, while the identification of the different forms of participation in the news coverage, discussed in this chapter, reflect the roles allocated Jordanians in the coverage of the political process (the ‘forms’), it does not inform us about the ‘extent’ of this positioning. For this end, beyond the different modes of participation identified in the coverage, the construction of the continuum and the coding of the vox-pops into SPSS, as will be discussed in Chapter VI, allows us to examine what modes of participation were portrayed most frequently, when citizens were
present and included in the coverage and when they excluded, and how these patterns differ across gender. By examining the very ‘publicness’ of transnational Arabic news broadcasters we can make inferences about the implications of such portrayals for understanding, and conceiving of, a sound theory of the transnational Arabic public sphere and the spaces allocated the ‘public’ in it.
Chapter IV: Exploring Performative Participation: the experiential
dimension of citizenship

Habermas’s literary public sphere was a site of genesis in the widest possible sense; all ideas, from the political to the musical, were first submitted in this forum. Critique also developed first within the literary public sphere before it became a staple of coffee-house debates. Forms of participation were diverse, and included the aesthetic and the emotive. The earliest manifestations of the literary public sphere, in Habermas’s account, were the Parisian salons; McGuigan has argued that soap operas, among other televised forms, are the sites of today’s cultural public sphere, and the spaces where questions relating to ‘who we are’ and ‘how we live’ are addressed (2010: 15-16).

Thus, while the previous chapter discussed the methodological approaches to investigating the portrayal of citizens as participants via the mediated political sphere, this chapter will outline the methods adopted to explore a more experiential and performative dimension of cultural ‘public sphering’. Mediated publicness via transnational media platforms has held monopoly control over the concept of the Arabic public sphere. It is hoped that by exploring both political and cultural manifestations of public spheres in the Arab world, a process that to my knowledge has not been attempted yet, debate on Arabic public spheres will be enriched and further informed. By looking specifically at the role and agency of the citizen, rather than the state or state players, the thesis complements discussions of the [mediated] Arabic public sphere that have overlooked the role of publics in pursuit of changes in broader political structures.

This chapter begins by discussing the rise in ‘performative social science’ and the equivalent shift in theatrical studies towards the exploration of the social dynamic of performance, and finally it provides detailed narratives of the performances, their structure, and the process through which they were analysed. Like the first case study, and for means of comparison, a Continuum of Engagement was inductively developed that is illustrative of the ways citizens contested and negotiated issues pertaining to the 2007 elections as well as parliamentary life and democratic values more generally. Once again, in order to account for who speaks and how they participate, gender, location and ‘apparent’ age group were considered as demographic factors.
The interactive theatre performances that formed the basis of this case study were held across Jordan in the build up to the elections. Habermas has argued that theatre audiences, alongside concert audiences, party assembles, and church congregations, constitute “occasional or arranged” publics around “particular presentations and events” (1996 cited in Pearson and Messenger-Davies 2005: 139). In this case study, the interactive theatre performances were ‘arranged’ (developed and performed) by a local NGO which uses the arts to advance social development, but they were funded by US and EU aid organisations. The plays focussed on issues relating to the parliamentary elections, such as political representation, tribal affiliation, gender and youth participation.

This chapter will now discuss the relevant methodologies to researching interactive theatre by considering both the perspectives of theatre studies (and its turn towards the social) as well as social science (and its turn toward the performative). The chapter will then provide a detailed narrative of the interactive theatre performances, including outlining the basic ‘script’ and the experiences associated with touring with the interactive theatre troupe and video-recording the debates. Finally, the chapter will outline how a Continuum of Engagement was developed to account for the different ways in which audiences engaged with the performances.

Literature and theory

During the early 1970s and through the 1980s, in the wake of post-structuralism, there started to emerge an area of theatrical discourse (among post-structuralist, semiotic and phenomenological scholars) that was interested in the experiential dimension of drama and theatre (as opposed to its literary and discursive aspects). A pioneer in the field, Richard Schechner, argued that a more encompassing understanding of performance needs to be adopted in theatrical studies that involves, in addition to traditional forms of the art, its ritualistic manifestations, in sports, ceremonies, play and any other public or private behaviour produced to elicit a response from an audience (Kennedy 2003: 1359). In what can be described as a ‘turn’ in theatre studies which had, up until then, borrowed its terms and methods from literary and art theory, Schechner turned to the social sciences.
At about the same time, Brian Roberts describes a ‘turn’ in social science that acknowledges the value of the performative in studying culture, in areas such as rituals and festivals and also identity and gender (2008: 5). Anthropologist Victor Turner was among the earliest social scientists to argue that theatre operated within the fluid space of culture and is the liminal site where cultural meanings are expressed and negotiated (Kennedy 2003: 1360). Burke explains that this rise of performance within social science research has been accompanied by a broader movement from “social or cultural fixity to that of fluidity, from scripts to improvisations, from mentalities to the habitus” (2005 cited in Roberts 2008: 5).

Schechner and Turner would eventually work together, and thus those two turns within theatre studies and social sciences grew to influence anthropology, then ethnography, finally facilitating the emergence of a “performative social science” as a qualitative research methodology. Bochner and Ellis (2003) believe that art can provide the media for personal and collective narratives that deliver ideas, insights, values and meanings:

“We believe that art-based research...can be used to examine ourselves, investigate and express the worlds of the others, transgress stifling conversations and boundaries, resist oppressions, grieve and heal, produce intersubjective knowledge, reveal hidden meanings of memory work, and come to terms with multiple and contradictory identities” (2003 cited in Roberts 2008: 16).

Several methodologies have emerged within performative social science; performative ethnography (see Denzin 2003) and ethnodrama (see the work of Mienczakowski 1995) both seek to emancipate and empower by revealing injustices in society and advocating change; and ethno-mimesis (see O’Neill and Harindranth 2006 who use it alongside Participatory Action Research (PAR)) a reflexive process that encourages participants to represent themselves, undermining the subject/object binary inherent within research processes. On the other hand, genres that emerge from theatre studies which tackle social issues include Forum Theatre and Legislative Theatre both influenced by the works of Augusto Boal and his mentor Paulo Friere; Improvisational Theatre, Development Theatre, Playback Theatre, Political Theatre and Psychodrama (which was developed by Jacob L. Moreno and is now commonly applied in group psychotherapy). Roberts explains that many of the aims and methods across performative social sciences and theatrical studies are paralleled (2008: 17-18) perhaps indicating that further collaboration and contextualisation is required.
Performative social science research continues to face the challenge of how to ‘assess’ and ‘analyse’ performance in its cultural sense. Geertz (1993) cites a “growing catalogue of particular studies” (rather than a single name) that attempt to understand and explain what a performance (in the widest possible sense) is trying to say (1993: 29). Geertz’s own approach is through the study of semiotics, although he argues for an approach that moves beyond the recognition of signs as a “code to be deciphered” towards a conceptualisation of them as “modes of thought, idiom to be interpreted” (ibid. 120). Geertz’s discussion of ‘art in culture’ places the performative firmly within the symbolic factory of meaning-making; he argues that “Art and the equipment to grasp it are made in the same shop” (ibid. 118),

“It is out of participation in the general system of symbolic forms we call culture that participation in the particular form we call art, which is in fact but a sector of it, is possible. A theory of art is thus at the same time a theory of culture, not an autonomous enterprise.” (1993: 109).

Yet, Geertz’s preference for ‘thick description’ and textual discussion has been described as ethnocentric; Conquergood explains that,

“Subordinate people do not have the privilege of explicitness, the luxury of transparency, the presumptive norm of clear and direct communication, free and open debate on a level playing field that the privileged classes take for granted” (2002: 146).

Conquergood continues to quote Gilroy (1994) on how countercultures create repertoires of performance practices as spaces of resistance, through dance, song and play, “because words...will never be enough to communicate its unsayable claims to truth” (1994 cited in 2002: 150). He argues that performance can be understood within three lines of activity and analysis: in terms of its creativity as a work of imagination; as a mode of critique and enquiry; and finally, as an intervention and an alternative space for struggle (citizenship) (2002: 152).

Building on Conquergood’s arguments, Denzin argues that if we accept the proposition that the world is a performance, not a text, then it follows that we require a performative model of social science to study and understand it (2003: 11). He continues to explain that since performances are emblems of lived experiences, and given that we cannot study experience directly, performative representations allow us to engage with the full range of emotions, fantasies and desires that create and sustain all that is political (2003: 12). Performance thus
conceived is interventionist and emancipatory, advocating negotiations of the culture which creates it through embodied experience, thus “reaffirm[ing], resist[ing], transgress[ing], “re-inscribe[ing] or passionately reinvent[ing]” (Diamond 1996: 2) repressive understandings that circulate in daily life.” (Denzin 2003: 10).

Drama and theatre in the Arabic world have developed distinct traditions to those of European genres, even though they both share their beginning in the fertility rituals of once upon a time. An account of the dramatic traditions of the Arab world, and specifically its ‘carnivalesque’, satirical and participatory characteristics, is provided in Chapter VII. Even in Jordan today, the medium of theatre remains a space for satirical socio-political expression, and the divisions between the actors and the audiences remain weaker than they are within traditional Western theatrical conventions. Therefore, audience engagement and participation with community theatre is altogether a more common and natural process.

It is perhaps fitting that performances of this sort (participatory and socio-politically engaged) and revolving around the (at the time) upcoming parliamentary elections were being planned at the same time I was developing an interest in the notion of the public sphere and its application to/manifestation in Arabic societies. These performances, which can be described as ‘occasional’ public spheres, can nevertheless be placed firmly within what can be conceived as a Jordanian cultural public sphere, where meanings (sociological but also inherently political) relating to processes of participation and meanings of citizenship can be, not just debated, but also embodied. This experiential dimension, which transcends the rigidity of the ‘logical-discursive’ normative requirement of the political public sphere, makes the cultural public sphere particularly suited to understand how societies operate beyond the cognitive level, and therefore, how change (and what kind of change) is being negotiated within.

The performances I attended and video recorded (30 overall of which I was able to attend and record 27) were produced and performed by the Interactive Theatre Troupe of the Performing Arts Centre (PAC), a royal NGO founded by HM Queen Noor al-Hussein in 1987 with the aim of developing an understanding and awareness of the value of the arts in the processes of education and social development (The Performing Arts Centre n/a: http://www.pac.org.jo/pages.php?menu_id=1). The plays were described by the Centre’s director Lina al-Tal as Interactive Theatre performances which sought to illicit participation and engagement from the audiences. This genre is not the same as Interactive Drama which is
largely improvisational (for a discussion of what Interactive Drama is and is not, see Phillips 2006). Rather, it seems to borrow principles from Theatre in Education (TIE), Forum Theatre and Propaganda Theatre.

TIE is a pedagogical approach to education that favours immersion and experience as valuable learning techniques. Used primarily in schools and with students to begin with, it has expanded into wider communities under the form of Development Theatre, which seeks to encourage healthier lifestyle choices, for example, through the promotion of contraception in rural East-Asian villages, or ways of decontaminating water in African towns. TIE aims to make audiences more aware of their societies and present them with ‘an experience’ (embodied and acted) that requires them to solve real-life issues. This allows ideas to be actively demonstrated and explored, a process that develops the audience’s understanding and builds their confidence in their problem-solving capacities, thus encouraging them to apply their skills and ideas in real life situations. Participation is integral to TIE performances, although the type and form of participation vary according to the aims of the production; Al-Tal’s thesis on the subject (unpublished, 1985) cites O’Toole’s distinction between extrinsic participation, integral participation and peripheral participation. The two former types allow considerable participation by audiences, as they test out their points of view on the actors or assume roles within the performance, they therefore require small audiences to be effective. Peripheral participation, on the other hand, encourages audience participation but requires that such participation does not alter the predetermined structure of the play. Participation of this type may include role playing as well as general discussions between actors and audiences between scenes (1976 cited in al-Tal 1985: 67-81).

In essence, TIE is less concerned with the functions of communicating ‘to’ an audience as is habitual in organised theatre, focusing instead on the experiential dimension of drama and encouraging the exploration and deeper reflection of issues and their manifestation in everyday life. It shares its principles with other participatory drama forms, such as community theatre and other genres under drama for development. Thus, rather than relay factual information, these more participatory forms of drama, according to Brian Way, transcend knowledge and enrich the imagination. He represents the disparity between the approaches in two possible answers to the question ‘What is a blind person?’,
“The reply could be ‘A blind person is a person who cannot see’. Alternatively, the reply could be ‘Close your eyes and, keeping them closed all the time, try to find your way out of this room’” (1967: 1).

To Way, practical drama in this sense helps the “natural, organic development of each individual, exploring, discovering and mastering his own resources, and attaining a sensitive, confident relationship with his environment” (1967: 268).

Similarly, Augusto Boal’s Forum Theatre is “a reflection on reality and a rehearsal for future action” (1998: 9). Boal argues that for an audience to engage with a performance, it needs to be of direct relevance to their everyday lives, addressing their social (and inherently political) concerns. By breaking the binary separation of actor and spectator, audiences assume the roles of ‘spect-actors’, intervening and suggesting alternative scenarios. Forum Theatre participation can take the form of role-playing, improvisation or discussion between the audience among themselves as well as discussions with the actors. Its aim, more than anything, is social-political agency through the cultural and the theatrical; Boal’s passion for and belief in the emancipatory possibilities of theatre are unambiguous:

“Hamlet says in his famous speech to the actors that theatre is a mirror in which may be seen the true image of nature, of reality. I wanted to penetrate this mirror, to transform the image I saw in it and to bring that transformed image back to reality; to realise the image of my desire. I wanted it to be possible for the spect-actors in Forum Theatre to transgress, to break the conventions, to enter into the mirror of a theatrical fiction, rehearse forms of struggle and then return to reality with the images of their desires” (1998: 9-10).

Finally, Propaganda Theatre, perhaps contrary to what the name implies, is theatre “by the people and for the people” (ibid. 213). It seeks to enlighten and explain through persuasion and advocacy in order to convince audiences to change their behaviour or to direct it in a certain way (ibid. 206).

The Interactive Theatre plays written and performed by the PAC, as I have argued, show different elements from these three drama genres. Firstly, the performances resembled Propaganda Theatre because they were didactic in nature, clearly trying to persuade audiences to change their voting patterns. They resembled Forum Theatre because they addressed social
and political issues of concern to Jordanian citizens, and they advocated the audience’s engagement with the scenario and encouraged them to create a different image in the ‘mirror’ and then to realise it in their everyday lives. And finally, the mode of participation in the performances can be described as peripheral, borrowing from TIE techniques that facilitate audience participation through role play as well debate and discussion between scenes, without changing the predetermined narrative of the performance. As such, the interactive performances that were recorded for this study aimed to propagate new ideas, extend and explore social awareness and to break down traditional boundaries between the performers and the audiences.

Two interactive plays were written and performed by the PAC troupe; both revolved around the parliamentary elections and voting habits of constituents (largely recognised to be tribal and familial rather than on the basis on political competency or ideology). Both plays offered two archetypical candidates, the first the kind that has so far been successful in getting to parliament, and a second ‘alternative’ candidate. In both cases, the alternative candidates were female while the established candidates were male.

*It’s My Right*

The first play, *Min Ḥaqqī* [It’s My Right] was originally scheduled to be performed in all 12 governorates in Jordan. The night before the scheduled performance in the city of Ajlun, this northern governorate, and its many olive groves, witnessed heavy rain showers in a country where rain is occasional and considered a blessing, and olives are believed to produce better olive oil if harvested right after a rain shower. And so, as we arrived at the community theatre where the troupe were scheduled to perform, only two other audience members were in the auditorium waiting for us (they later turned out to be *mukhabarat* (intelligence agents)). This was unusual given that most performances were packed with people before the acting crew (and myself accompanying them) arrived. We waited for a while, but then a representative of the women’s union in Ajlun showed up with an apology and explained that Ajlunis have been harvesting their olives since the early morning because of the rain showers the night before, and the long queues outside the local oil refineries indicated that ‘most families will still be waiting their turn when the sun sets’. True to her word, as we were leaving Ajlun, we passed by an oil refinery and saw a long queue of families (lining up together) with big sacks of what we can
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presume is their olive harvest. The performance in Ajlun was never rescheduled due to a tight (performance) schedule.

In the other 11 governorates, rural and urban, It’s My Right was performed in community centres, cultural centres and youth centres, as well as schools, universities and once, a municipality theatre. Some performances were held in small crowded rooms, in tents on university campuses, in a football stadium, and other times in more traditional theatres. My video recordings include 16 performances of It’s My Right. The performances were all public and the audience therefore varied significantly, from the elderly to the young, educated to illiterate, tribal figures to young students.

The performance featured Abu Ahmad, tribe leader in his town, and an established MP who intends to run for a third parliamentary cycle (after 8 years of serving in parliament). He wears a traditional Jordanian Ḥatta (red and white chequered headgear) with a suit jacket and trousers, and speaks with a strong authoritative voice. Running against him is Um Omar [literally: mother of Omar, a common and respectful way of addressing parents], an active social worker who assumed positions within the Women’s Union in her town and is now head teacher at her local school after a long career in teaching. She wears a traditional Jordanian thoub (embroidered dress) and a scarf (hijab) that covers her hair. Other characters include her husband Abu Omar [father of Omar] who fully supports his wife in her bid to run for parliament, and their son Omar.

The first scene of It’s My Right introduces the audience to the family and shows them discussing the logistics of Um Omar’s parliamentary campaign (finances and outreach events). Information is provided on the structure of government (the relationship between the executive and legislative branches) and comedy is used to identify unhealthy practices prevalent in parliamentary campaigns. Throughout, Um Omar articulates her intention to improve her town’s social and economic standards through drafting legislation and adopting rules and regulations that will benefit the entire country.

Abu Ahmad walks in. Abu Ahmad is the tribal leader in the town and he is also Abu Omar’s cousin. Abu Ahmad has been the town’s MP in the last two parliamentary cycles (4 years each) and intends to run again. He heard of Um Omar’s decision to run for parliament and has come to reprehend her. He yells and scolds, arguing that her decision will scatter tribe
votes, therefore helping a person from a different tribe win the seat. He also warns that he will disown Abu Omar (from the tribe) if his wife does not change her mind.

The scene ends there, and the moderator, Muhannad, starts a 10-15 minute discussion with the audience about the scene, usually around the following succession of questions:

- Are there many Abu Omars in our society who would support their wives even if it meant social rejection?
- Are there many Abu Ahmads in our society who keep on running for election over and over again?
- What kind of qualities are we looking for when we elect a parliamentarian?
- What are the duties and powers of the lower house of parliament?
- Would you elect your tribal leader even if you think he is not qualified for the job?
- Does gender affect your decision as voters?
- What is the best way of finding out which candidate is closest to your ideals and values?

Muhannad always ended the debate with this last question, concluding with the audience that debate and discussion are the most effective means of understanding the candidate’s social, political and economic agendas. Muhannad would then go on to say that they now have the opportunity to do just that; he calls Um Omar and Abu Ahmad in to take part in a public debate, and invites the audience to act as constituents in a parliamentary debate, quizzing and questioning candidates on their political ideologies and personal experience (competence).

In the next 15-20 minutes, the audience is transformed from spectators to the role of active citizens. The scenario might seem very naïve when described in this manner, but the approach is incredibly effective, and it is never long before the audience start addressing Abu Ahmad as if he is really their MP, blaming him for the unemployment rate and the poverty, mocking him for driving flashy cars, enquiring where he was all those times when they come knocking on his door for help.

Whilst audience responses to the first discussion forum with the moderator Muhannad showed some similar attitudes that cut across the different locales, the role playing in this second interactive exercise differed significantly from one governorate to the next. When ‘spect-acting’ as constituents questioning their parliamentary candidates, the audience would bring up problems related particularly to their region and ask or critique Abu Ahmad on how he
dealt with the issue (thus airing frustrations harboured against their own – actual – representative). For example, audiences in the poor governorate of Mafraq focussed largely on unemployment and poverty, whilst in a youth centre in Madaba, the debate centred on increased university tuition fees, youth apathy and the practice of voting with blank ballots. In the Baqa’a refugee camp the audience accused Abu Ahmad again and again of fleeing their camp and living in (opulent) Amman, which they argued explains why he is never home when they came round.

Abu Ahmad’s responses were always similar, and meant to distance people from voting for his likes again. He would say he lives in Amman now because that way he is closer to parliament and the Royal Court, so he can improve his ‘connections’ and therefore serve the town/city better. He would insist that he did improve his town’s conditions, and that he employed a number of citizens through ḏastā [personal connection]. Um Omar, however, when asked, would always provide solutions through proposed legislation, such as increasing the minimum wage and providing benefits for the unemployed.

However, although the audiences across all governorates were quick to criticise Abu Ahmad, they unfortunately were not any more open to Um Omar. Many participants rationally concluded that her talk is useless because the lack of political parties means she would be unable to pass legislation on her own. Um Omar would reply that if citizens across Jordan elected capable parliamentarians who share her ideas then that would help them pass legislation in parliament, and even help kick start political party development. The audience never seemed fully convinced, many would heckle: ‘we heard this talk a lot’.

Muhammad, the moderator, then intervened to thank the candidates, and sometimes, he turned to the audience and asked them who they would vote for out of the two candidates. However, this did not happen all the time. Muhammad sometimes skipped the ‘voting’ at the end for time considerations. Another reason may have been that the voting usually led to the majority of audience members choosing to vote for neither – hardly a desirable conclusion given that one of the initial aims of the performance was encouraging participation.
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Elections Round the Corner

The second interactive performance produced by the PAC troupe was entitled al-Intikhabat ‘ala al-Abwab [literally: Elections at the Door; meaning: Elections Round the Corner]. Like It’s My Right, the theme of the performance revolved around the parliamentary elections and advocated voting for candidates on the basis of their political ideology and competency rather than familial ties. However, unlike It’s My Right, Elections Round the Corner aimed to address a younger and more urban audience, and it also covered themes relating to youth participation. The play had a more specific target audience and was performed in two governorates, the capital Amman and its surrounding towns and the city of Irbid and its surrounding constituencies and was only performed in schools and university campuses. My video recordings include 11 performances of Elections Round the Corner.

Also unlike It’s My Right, which featured a traditional ‘tribal’ candidate and an alternative ‘activist’ candidate, Elections Round the Corner centres round a challenge between bureaucracy (in the figure of Abu Sanad) and technocracy (in the figure of Bushra Sayel). Abu Sanad is a retired former government employee who received a reward of distinction because of his long service in government; he wears a suit, speaks in a commanding manner, and is irritable and uncompromising. Bushra Sayel is a young human rights lawyer and a women’s rights activist who writes a column on the issues facing youth in a local newspaper. She also wears a suit and does not wear a scarf over her hair. Other characters include Sanad (Abu Sanad’s son), his friend Ghaith and their friend Rahaf (who is also Bushra Sayel’s daughter). Rahaf, Sanad and Ghaith attend the same university together and are good friends.

Elections Round the Corner opens with Sanad, a university student in his dorm room, woken up by a friend (Ghaith) who rushes in with a traditional breakfast of falafel, humus and foul. Sanad then goes on to show his friend the promotional posters and brochures he has been designing for a [female] candidate running for the national elections. The conversation between the two friends is infused with comedy, but it also addresses issues relating to the importance of youth engaging in politics (and elections) and voting for candidates based on their track-record of achievements and competencies. In fact, the discussion (and banter) between Sanad and Ghaith emphasises Sanad’s conviction of the aptitude of the candidate for legislative work. Sanad insists that the candidate [Bushra Sayel] is neither a relative nor a tribal relation and
argues that he chose to volunteer for her campaign because of her record as a human rights lawyer, as well as her in-depth understanding of the problems facing Jordan’s youth.

At that point Sanad’s father walks in and after greeting the two friends he declares that he has decided to run for a parliamentary seat himself. He is unaware of his son’s political activism. Ghaith quickly excuses himself and leaves while Sanad attempts to talk his father out of his decision. Sanad credits his father’s personal integrity and dedication to his family, but questions his capacity for political and legislative work given his lack of expertise in the fields. Naturally, Abu Sanad is surprised at Sanad’s attitude and irritably informs him that he expects more support from a son he has supported throughout his life. The moderator, Muhannad, then walks in, notes the tough position Sanad is in, and excuses the actors from stage.

Muhannad then notes that Sanad feels torn between a candidate he supports and believes is qualified to be an MP and his father, a person he loves and respects dearly but who lacks the skills needed for the job. Muhannad would then ask the audience what they would do if they found themselves in Sanad’s shoes. The following debate, usually 10-15 minutes long, would cover similar themes to those in It’s My Right:

- Would you vote for someone from your family even if you knew they were not qualified for legislative roles?
- On what basis do you vote for parliamentary candidates?
- What are the roles and powers of the lower house of parliament?
- How can you choose between candidates most effectively?

Again, Muhannad would hint that debate and deliberation with all candidates are the most effective means of choosing an appropriate candidate, and the next scene begins.

The second scene opens with Bushra Sayel, the parliamentary candidate Sanad supports, and her daughter Rahaf sitting in a café discussing Sanad’s dilemma. Sanad’s friend, Ghaith, is the waiter and he joins in the conversation. Sanad then walks in and insists on showing Bushra Sayel his work even after she confirms that she would fully understand his withdrawal from her campaign.

While Bushra Sayel is admiring his work, Abu Sanad walks in (still does not know that his son is helping another candidate). He says that he came to the café he knows his son hangs out in to get closer to the city’s youth and better understand their needs and problems. Sanad
admits that he is helping Bushra Sayel but that he is now ready to help his father if he insists on running, despite Sanad’s reservations. Sanad’s dad retorts that he is the most capable candidate and invites Mrs. Sayel to an open debate in the town hall to prove this. She accepts.

Muhammad briefly walks in and explains that the audience must now assume the roles of constituents in the city Abu Sanad and Bushra Sayel are competing to represent. He asks them to engage the candidates in discussion, questioning them on their capabilities and ideologies, in order to find out who is the most suitable for the post of the city’s MP. As in It’s My Right, this part of the play would see the audience transform itself from spectators to active citizens.

Research design

As noted earlier, the performative turn in social sciences leaves many questions relating to the analysis and assessment of research open, particularly given its rejection of the textual metaphor with its ‘thick’ descriptions of worlds unengaged with. Similarly, artists and dramatists are increasingly borrowing methods and metaphors from the social sciences to theorise their art (in galleries and theatres) as sites “primed for cultural critique and commentary” (Butler 2008: 35). However, Butler points out that questions remain as to whether art can in fact provide a large enough sample for analysis, or whether it actually should (ibid. 38). Brian Way articulates this dilemma best when he describes “doing drama” as the “wisest way of developing individuality”, whilst “doing ethnography” is a search for communality (perhaps at the expense of individuality?) (Way 1967: 3).

Yet, this research was interested in uncovering the socio-political dimensions of participation and publicness in the cultural public sphere, understood as a space that allows for the negotiation (and renegotiation) of cultural meanings and symbols away from the regulated sphere of official politics and its perversion towards ‘masculine’ discourses of logic. As such, “[u]sing performative approaches opens up the possibility to gain an understanding of the social situation beyond the rational and cognitive level” (Battisti and Eiseleen 2008: abstract). The two interactive theatre plays that I attended and recorded (a total of 27) across Jordan in the run up to the elections allowed me to engage with and be part of the process of participation and negotiation enacted by citizens taking part in public discourse. This experiential ‘data’ provides insight into actual publicness and its manifestations in a way that interviews with
Jordanian citizens would not have, precisely because it encourages participation ‘beyond the cognitive’.

The problem of analysing and assessing the performative, in this case, rested on the comparative element of this research. The interest in, and need to, understand how public spheres operated within the abstract political (normatively associated with the news media) and the cultural (here associated with the interactive performances across the country) dictated that similar ways of examining ‘publicness’ be pursued. Thus, just as a continuum of participation was developed from the citizen vox-pops in the first case study of this thesis, a similar continuum was developed for the interactive performances.

Similar to the first case study, all remarks, banter, questions, heckles, yells and otherwise voiced by the audience during the performance were transcribed each on a separate index (record) card which was colour coded for gender. In addition, the location of the performance of each participating comment, and the apparent age group of the commentator, were noted on the index cards. After all the performances were transcribed similar ways of talking and engaging started to emerge and they were grouped together accordingly. The Continuum of Engagement was therefore developed inductively to represent the different ways in which audiences enacted their roles as citizens. Unlike the Continuum of Participation that emerged from the news coverage, which largely saw citizens commenting on their engagement with the political process, the Continuum of Engagement that emerged out of the interactive theatre performances showed more engagement with ideological values than with the political process as such. It also showed that citizens engaged in much more diverse ways in the cultural public sphere than they were portrayed as doing in the mediated political public sphere.

As noted, all comments and remarks by audience members were transcribed; these totalled 826 of which 404 were made by women and 422 were made by men. The inductive process of finding similar patterns and modes of participation produced a continuum that was marked by particular values at the lower end, and universal values at the higher end. This classification does not assume that universal attitudes are ‘better’ than particular ones; all it does is show a number of different modes of engagement which can comfortably succeed each other between these two ends of the continuum. Eight modes of engagement were developed, as Figure IV.a illustrates:
The two interactive performances, *It’s My Right* and *Elections Round the Corner*, were written, directed and performed by the PAC’s interactive theatre troupe. The funding for the performances, however, was acquired through two grants; the first through Freedom House (http://www.freedomhouse.org/) under the auspices of the Freedom House’s Grant with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and the second through the EU Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) under its micro-projects initiative (http://ec.europa.eu/). The Freedom House grant funded performances of *It’s My Right*, whilst the EIDHR grant funded performances of *Elections Round the corner*.

Freedom House was founded in 1941 with the aim of fighting fascism during World War II through lobbying. Its main sources of funding are the U.S. Department of State and USAID. Freedom House’s reported budget in the financial year of 2004 was $16 million (Carnegie Endowment 15 March 2006: http://www.carnegieendowment.org/). According to the organization’s website, Freedom House “…supports democratic change, monitors freedom, and advocates for democracy and human rights” (http://www.freedomhouse.org/); their programmes in Jordan focus on human rights and gender equality (ibid.).
The EIDHR grew out of the European initiative in 2006 with the aim of providing financial support to civil society and non-governmental organizations to fund activities that promote the processes of democratization, human rights and fundamental freedoms beyond the EU states. Its budget for 2007-2013 is set at €1.104 million and includes funding for diplomatic initiatives, including political dialogue, as well as crisis-intervention and technical cooperation projects (http://ec.europa.eu/).

Prior to the liberalization of the economy in 1989, Jordanian NGOs had to go through government channels to approach and secure foreign funding, but the deteriorating economic situation and the increased demand for NGO services led to the relaxation of such restrictions considerably. The liberalization of the economy was also met with greater interest among foreign donors in funding local NGO projects, and following the signing of the Framework Convention between the European Union and Jordan, the government lost its power to deny funding requests or intervene in the administration of funding (Bint Talal 2004: 89).

The relaxation of funding restrictions increased competitiveness amongst local NGOs, but also fuelled debate and controversy perhaps because of the affinity foreign funding displayed towards certain sensitive issues (public policy, human rights, press freedoms or gender equality) (ibid.). Such debate has at times escalated into legal issues; in one instance, for example, the Jordan Bar Association petitioned the government to investigate and intervene when one of its members was believed to have accepted foreign funding on behalf of a human rights organization (ibid.90). Controversies surrounding foreign funding are all the more sensitive when donors are perceived to be pro-Israel or are trying to propagate ‘normalization’ with the state of Israel.

The literature review covering [Western-funded] democracy promotion initiatives in the region is extensive, but will not be reviewed here for the same reason the plays themselves (the script, acting, ‘message’) will not be analysed thematically or ideologically; primarily that the case study is not interested in the plays themselves, but rather, in the ways in which audiences who attended the plays participated in negotiating and discussing their affairs. This space, situated between the art world and the ‘political’ world, and between the everyday (issues) and the occasional (the plays) has been described as a cultural public sphere where society is understood through a wider prism that delves beyond the cognitive to understand how citizens explore and negotiate the world around them, and therefore, how and where change begins.
Thus, whilst the interactive performances were facilitators of such an occasional cultural public sphere (resembling the role of mediation of the news media in the first case study), the analysis is particularly interested in the citizens themselves, as individuals, and the ways in which they engaged with the performances and each other as citizens discussing public affairs and as a public expressing the public pain. As Ridout explains,

“This is the crucial innovation of such analysis: that it enables us to think of performance – whether it is theatre or sport – as something that forms part of the entire ensemble of social relations rather than as an autonomous viewpoint from which the culture of the society in question may be interpreted. That is to say that performance – including theatre – enjoys no privileged knowledge about itself or its world, no position which might allow it to stand apart from the myths or ideologies which shape and sustain the society of which it is part. Its knowledge can only be immanent critique, making partially visible, in the very act of ideological transmission, the nature of the ideological form.” (2008: 17).

Chapter VII will explore the historical relevance of participatory theatre to the Arab world, including Jordan, and Chapter VIII will outline the findings of this case study and discuss the results.
Analysis and Discussion
Chapter V: News coverage of the Elections in Context: the Arabic public sphere and the Jordanian elections

“Television...has become, for better or worse, the major institution of the public sphere in modern society” (Dahlgren 1995: x).

As societies grow larger and more complex, the new emerging media, particularly television, retain the capacity to facilitate the kind of debate necessary for sustaining a viable public sphere. However, as media institutions become more centralized, they become more inaccessible to citizens and their interventions. In Habermas’s critical assessment of the decline of the bourgeois public sphere, he argues that the commercialisation of the mass media has led to the “refeudalization” of the public sphere effectively reducing it into a “field for the competition of interests” (1974: 54) and transforming the audience from “citizens to consumers” (1989: 195). Critical-rationality as a normative ideal never materialises, and the politics of publicity dominate. Citizenship becomes an act of choosing between crafted and staged arguments, rather than an ability to participate in the formation and articulation of those arguments. The end result is that the ‘project’ of deliberation is taken over by societal powers who attempt to govern behind closed doors as much as possible, seeking only “plebiscitarian approval” from the public (1974: 54).

However, Habermas later revised his position after rethinking the orientation of his theory and its embeddedness in the Frankfurt School’s intellectual traditions. His revision of the theory of the public sphere conceded to the ability of civil society institutions (non-governmental, non-economic and voluntary) to acquire influence in the public sphere “under certain circumstances”. He also developed a theory of ‘communicative action’ that considered how language and communication can resist the domination of money and power and promote societal democratization. The public sphere is seen as capable of enabling an ‘Ideal Speech Situation’ based on four validity claims to comprehensibility, truth, appropriateness and sincerity. These validity claims generate norms to criticize distortions of communication in the public sphere through their “...capacity to understand the speech of the other; to submit to the force of a better argument; and to reach consensus” (Ayish 2008: 43).
However, tensions persist between this sociologically ascribed role for television (promoting the public sphere) and television’s institutional obligations as an industry. Whilst acknowledging that consumerism as an ideological force mitigates against the formation of collective identities and actions (as solutions are always presented as individual), Dahlgren (1995) goes on to illustrate the dichotomy between the normative ideal of the public sphere and the ‘act’ of ‘public sphering’ often expected of television broadcasting:

“Television operates in this late modern setting as an industry, as an incessant producer of audio-visual discourses which have a central position in the semiotic environment. As an industry, television has to follow the precepts of audience maximization and profits; moreover, it is the paramount vehicle for consumer culture. While television is the dominant medium of the public sphere, ‘public sphering’ is clearly not television’s dominant purpose, and its institutional logic of course greatly conditions its role within the public sphere.” (1995: 148)

This chapter will consider particularly the available literature on the mediated Arabic public sphere of transnational news media. As I hope to show, available studies have been confined to the citationary, with authors quoting and answering each other, largely on whether a public sphere is emerging or whether this ‘apparent’ existence is actually a façade. There have been few empirical contributions and discussions continue to focus on ‘structures’ and ‘foundations’ at the expense of considerations of how ‘publicness’ manifests in terms of citizen participation and portrayal. This chapter is thus an extensive literary introduction that aims to contextualise the empirical findings discussed in the next chapter. For this reason, it also provides background information on the Jordanian parliamentary elections of 2007, including underlining issues like the electoral law, the female quota and transparency of the electoral proceedings.

The development of transnational media in the Arab world has historically been linked to government monopolies that have used media actively to propagate their positions on political, ideological and social issues. Ayish provides a detailed account of the development of such media from the early 1950s to the late 1990s (2008: 114-123). He begins with the Arab press and describes the flourishing of “hundreds” of publications across the expanse of the Arab world; however, while they provided rich cultural and intellectual perspectives, the Arabic press remained limited in their political orientations (Berjas 1988 cited in Ayish 2008: 115). The
Chapter V: News coverage of the elections in context

development of radio as a government tool in the post-colonial era was also closely associated with the ‘voice’ of the government of the day. Radio was used as a one-way platform to facilitate the propagation of state policy, not just within national boundaries, but also across the Arab world. President Nasser’s highly effective use of radio to ‘spread’ his nationalist ideology and gain influence across the region is a most fitting example. Even then, however, Arab listeners also had access to international and Western broadcasters, such as Radio Monte Carlo and the Arabic BBC service. On the other hand, Voice of America, notes Ayish, was very poorly received in the region because it was perceived as “biased” and too closely associated with unpopular US foreign policies in the region (ibid.). Lynch also notes that while Arab summits only authorised sovereign heads of state to participate, the advent of radio meant anyone could register an opinion and be heard (1999: 62-62). It is in this regard that he argues that participation, and who participates, in public spheres matters; it can uncover “…which actors can legitimately participate, and whether exclusions are constitutive or incidental” (ibid.)

The preoccupation of Arab governments with radio, coupled with a number of factors like low TV set diffusion in the Arab world, meant that the development of television as a communicative platform only ensued in the 1960s, and was immediately set the task of playing a role in ‘statehood’ and ‘national building’, especially as most Arabic states had recently gained independence and were earnest to ‘define’ themselves as post-colonial governments. Television broadcasting was thus monopolised by the government of the day and assumed the role of propagator of core positions and policies, domestic, regional and foreign. The only exception to this trend was Lebanon which developed a multi-system broadcasting environment; in the other Arab states television remained an institution associated with the Ministry of Information or the Prime Minister himself (Ayish 2008: 118-119). This state of affairs remained pretty much unchanged until the launch of al-Jazeera in 1996. The channel’s popularity propelled a throng of other satellite network emulating its style and ferocity to emerge; and with them, debate about a ‘nascent’ Arabic public sphere arose.

As outlined in Chapter I, debates on the nature of the Arabic public sphere vary across, or rather around, two central arguments. The first argument asserts that the greater freedom of expression tolerated on Arabic language transnational news networks in the region potentially acts as a catalyst for an Arabic public sphere where oppositional voices are heard and public argument is contested, sometimes even effectively influencing government policy. The second argument, however, holds that criticism of Middle Eastern governments ‘on the air’
actually maintains the status quo by encouraging citizens to ‘vent’ their frustrations without leading to tangible outcomes. This dichotomy is in fact synonymous with arguments about the relationship between public spheres and the media more generally. Dahlgren (1995) describes the relationship between television journalism and democracy as caught-up between two positions: the ‘staunch defenders’ and the ‘severe critics’ (1995: 47). The former, he argues, stress the media’s capacity in enhancing public knowledge, encouraging democratic participation, developing public culture and ensuring a level of accountability from the powerful. On the other hand, the ‘severe critics’ question the institutional embeddedness of news media within dominant political and economic structures, blame the news media for constricting necessary knowledge while providing incoherent and fragmented bits of information, and for positioning viewers as powerless spectators.

As noted earlier, Habermas’s conceptualisation of a “sphere which mediates between society and state” (1974: 50) and where Arab issues can be critically and rationally deliberated, received renewed interest after the launch of al-Jazeera in the mid nineties. The news channel’s daring and controversial reporting ensured its popularity and success, and this led to the emergence of a throng of similar news channels, all transcending state boarders (and thus, theoretically, state control) and broadcasting to a transnational Arab audience. Twelve years later prevailing attitudes on the success of the transnational media liberalisation project remain divided between what can be classified as the ‘cautious optimists’ and the ‘structural sceptics’. Like Dahlgren’s ‘staunch defenders’, the Arabic public sphere’s ‘cautious optimists’ highlight the media’s potential capacity to expand freedom of expression in the region and undermine state control, enhance the plurality of voices and perspectives aired, and serve as an arena for the articulation and negotiation of public argument. Unlike their counterparts in Dahlgren’s classification, however, they are ‘cautious’ because they acknowledge the limitations on the medium’s capacity to fulfil such roles given the top-down nature of the media liberalization project in the region, and continued state influence over acceptable boundaries of discourse and discussion.

On the other hand, the ‘structural sceptics’ question the independence of transnational media in the region and argue instead that they serve as political tools on behalf of the states that own and finance them (both directly and indirectly). They point to the selective use and adoption of information technology by Arab countries, effectively limiting any potential for change and development through the medium (clearly identified in the absence of structural
reforms within Arab states). Finally, structural sceptics insist that by allowing Arab citizens to vent their frustrations on air, the transnational media serve as a ‘safety valve’ (an often named culprit is al-Jazeera), giving the illusion of greater freedom of expression, but ultimately maintaining the status quo.

*The structural sceptics*

Daniel Lerner’s 1958 examination of *The Passing of Traditional Society* and the transition to modernity in the Middle East saw in the region’s mass media the “most dynamic power for modernization” (1958: 46). Lerner based his analysis on the model of modernisation developed in the West – which he asserted was of ‘global relevance’ (*ibid.* – and provided compelling examples to support his case. In one such example, he noted how King Abdullah I of Jordan, who was used to ruling arbitrarily, reversed a ‘rumoured’ decision to sign a peace treaty with Israel in the 1940s as a result of a “violent press campaign” against any such possible agreement (1958: 311).

However, when Fayed Kazan (1993) sought to replicate Lerner’s study nearly 40 years later, taking into account the media advances that have taken hold since (such as the introduction of television), he arrived at a very different conclusion. Kazan’s analysis demonstrated that technological innovations in the mass media were being very selectively adopted in the Gulf states, and that their incorporation was applied in such a way as to insure the continuity of the current socio-economic rule. Kazan argued that Lerner’s original study “…assumed the neutrality of the government and other societal institutions in the modernization and development process or assumed a marginal role for them at best” (1993: 181).

Similarly, Mamoun Fandy and Mohamed Zayani have both challenged the perceived ‘neutrality’ of Arab states in the development process, and argue that they have been an obvious deterrent to the development of a dynamic public sphere sustained by transnational media. Fandy dismisses the ‘claims of independence’ made by transnational news channels and maintains that Arab states – rather than market forces – continue to shape the content of the transnational media. He points out that all transnational news channels are owned, financed, and therefore controlled, by “states, state proxies, or various ideological religious or ethnic
groups”, which explains why responses to al-Jazeera’s content (for example) have been mostly state-to-state rather than state-to-media (such as Jordan recalling its ambassador from Doha after a controversial episode of al-Jazeera’s weekly *The Opposite Direction* in August 2002) (2007: 2-3). Ayish (2003) similarly argues that,

“Realities on the ground show that private media in the Arab world, especially television, hardly make viable profit as they operate as part of broader corporate structures with huge financial resources to draw on. It is clear that as they operate within huge corporate structures, private media are not expected to make financial profit per se, but to diffuse a specific ideology that fits within existing mainstream and political orientations” (cited in Ayish 2008: 53).

In addition, El-Oifi maintains that the transnational media in the Arab world have been “exploited” by rich oil-producing countries, and the result is a glut of channels that offer entertainment – mainly Western imported sitcoms and Hollywood movies – on a much larger scale than news and current affairs (El-Oifi 2005: 74). A notable example is the Middle East Broadcasting Centre (MBC) owned by a wealthy Saudi prince (the brother-in-law of the late King Fahd) (Miles 2005: 220) that offers seven free-to-air satellite channels:

- **MBC1**, offers a wide range of Arabic sitcoms, movies, Western adapted game shows (like *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?*) as well as news and current affairs programming (“but it strictly avoid[s] anything that might infringe on the interests of the Saudi government” (*ibid*. 27).
- **MBC2** is dedicated to broadcasting American sitcoms and talk shows (*Oprah, Rachel Ray, Doctor Phil* and *Desperate Housewives* to name but a few), Turkish imported soaps, as well as English language movies on the weekends.
- **MBC 3** is a 24hour cartoon channel aimed at children. The cartoons are imported but dubbed in Arabic.
- **MBC 4** is a 24 hour movie channel dedicated to showing the best of Hollywood, past and present.
- **MBC MAX** is also a dedicated movie channel, which alongside movie screenings has news programmes dedicated to showbiz news.
- **MBC Action** offers the most popular Western thriller sitcoms (such as *CSI, Lost* and *Prison Break*).
And finally, al-Arabiya is a 24 hour Arabic language news channel, launched in 2003, with the aim of outspending and outrunning al-Jazeera (ibid. 220). Hostilities between Saudi Arabia and the wealthy Emir of Qatar (who sponsors al-Jazeera) are stone deep and well known.

Miles describes the effect of this pre-eminence of entertainment as “tranquilizing”; he explains,

“Many Arabs I met told me that the explosion of new media in the Middle East is simply tranquilizing them. With so much talk about al-Jazeera, it is easy to forget that the most popular shows on Arab television are Egyptian and Lebanese soap operas and films, as well as imported Western game shows.” (ibid. 327 – 28).

While the dominance of entertainment may be ‘tranquilising’, news and current affairs programming are also often scrutinised for ‘sensationalist’ and ‘emotionally charged’ content, particularly so on al-Jazeera. Steven Wu argues that al-Jazeera’s tendency to promote only “empty controversy” provides Arab states with an excuse to delay liberalization by pointing to the channel’s excesses (cited in Zayani 2005a: 33). Similarly, in an article on al-Jazeera’s coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, John R. Bradley argues that the channel’s ‘emotional’ coverage boosts the region’s governments by sidetracking national attention from local issues and diverting it outward. He claims that “[al-Jazeera] is doing this even more effectively than the government-appointed editors in chief across the region.” (cited in Zayani 2005b: 176). Furthermore, Zayani argues that the technological revolution apparent on transnational media has not been matched by institutional modernisation within Arab states. The author sees this as a clear demonstration of the inability of a liberalised media environment to create or sustain real change if institutions themselves do not evolve and adapt (2005a: 33-35).

For this reason, structural sceptics claim that any perceived transnational public sphere is in actuality a virtual façade and that the margin of freedom that some networks enjoy gives the illusion of democracy while postponing real political reform. Fandy believes that this has resulted in a trend that substitutes real politics for virtual politics. He argues that Arab governments encourage this ‘vicarious’ participation that does not lead to any political change. “The Arabs are happy that they see themselves on television the same way that as a child I was happy to discover the Polaroid. Snap, yes, I do exist.” (cited in Miles 2005: 328). Zayani concurs,
claiming that “The Arab public seems to be content with satellite democracy” (2005a: 33). Thus, rather than offer a platform for critical-rational deliberation, Zayani sees news media in the Arab world as serving the role of a shock-buffer between reality and the viewers by providing ordinary muted Arabs with an outlet to vent, in what he describes as a ‘suffocating atmosphere’ in the region’s countries (2005a: 9). Zayani seems to suggest that this venting is peripheral, and gives the illusion of empowerment while actually sustaining existing inequalities.

In conclusion, structural sceptics refute any possible relationship between transnational media liberalisation and the development of an Arabic public sphere on the basis of foundationalist arguments that contextualise the transnational media firmly within broader state structures. The lack of institutional state reform and the weak autonomy of civil society institutions are seen as contributors to state hegemony over transnational media.

*The cautious optimists*

Habermas has explained that “By “the public sphere” we mean first of all a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed” (1974: 49). It is precisely this conceptualisation of the public sphere, as a realm, a platform for differing perspectives, opinions and positions that can be traced in the arguments of the cautious optimists.

Naomi Sakr acknowledges that the “dominant themes of satellite channel ownership in the Middle East in the 1990s were the protection of vested interests” (2001: 56), yet she breaks away from the structural sceptics in her analysis of al-Jazeera’s coverage which “swept into television screens across the region by breaking taboos” (*ibid.*). Sakr sees in transnational media an instrument for influencing the state monopoly broadcasters across the Arab world by “forcing them to face unwanted competition” (2001: 4). She explains that,

“Middle Eastern information ministers had to face the possibility that foreign broadcasters would regale local viewers with news of, and commentaries on, local affairs that information ministries were responsible for hushing up” (*ibid.*).

Annabelle Sreberny concurs, pointing to the degree to which transnational news broadcasting has been successful in providing a plethora of perspectives and bypassing state
censorship. She points to the abundance of well articulated arguments to be found among news channels in the Arab world and describes how the lack of coverage of a certain story on one channel is easily reversed by tuning into another channel. Likewise, one forcefully articulated position can be seen to be challenged by an equal but opposing argument on another channel. This, according to the author, makes censorship harder to legitimate and achieve, and also disturbs the prevailing “regimes of truth” in the region (2001: 113). The beneficiaries of this ‘disturbance’ of prevailing narratives, to Sakr, are the region’s intellectuals who “basked in the limelight state television denied them” (2001: 4). She notes that, “The satellite channels appeared to provide people outside government with a unique platform from which to communicate with policy-makers and the wider public” (ibid.), a feature congruent with normative understandings of the public sphere.

El-Nawawy and Iskandar (2002) insist that al-Jazeera is a force for democratization and liberty in the region. They argue that by breaking away from the monotony of the state-run channels, and offering viewers comprehensive discussions on a wide range of subjects, al-Jazeera has provided its audience with a taste of freedom that they will not give up easily. In this regard, they believe the transnational media have advanced Arab societies “a significant step towards democracy” (2002: 200). On a wider scale, Eickelman and Anderson contend that new forms of communication have played a “significant role in fragmenting and contesting political and religious authority” (1991: 1), not just in the Arabic public sphere, but in the wider Muslim public sphere as well. The authors maintain that the new media effectively bracket the divisions between senders and receivers, and allow Muslim publics to form new communities, and implicitly, new understandings and interpretations of religion in their lives.

A compelling case study is to be found in Marc Lynch’s (2003) research on the transnational media’s impact on, and relation to, an Arabic public sphere during the second Gulf War. Lynch’s study demonstrated how the medium of transnational news was successfully used for the mobilisation of what amounted to social and civic movements that acted as pressure groups on the region’s governments. The author insists that this also facilitated the alliance between Arabist and Islamic groups across the region, transcending historic differences between the two camps. Lynch also argued that the information coming out of Iraq through the transnational news media played a significant part in enriching the public sphere by constantly supplying new information. He adds that public sympathy for Iraq did not exist naturally or automatically, nor were the opinions and attitudes expressed through the transnational media
homogenous. In fact, the new information coming out of Iraq and transmitted via the transnational media facilitated the continuous negotiation and retuning of public attitudes, as is normatively expected from a pluralistic public sphere.

While Lynch is quick to recognise that transnational public spheres lack mechanisms by which to translate even a strong public consensus into policy outcomes - as envisioned in Habermas’s two-track conception of modern democratic systems - he maintains that the weakness of these mechanisms should not imply an absence of a public sphere in itself (2003: 58). Therefore, he tactfully concludes that although the media did not directly force Arab governments to adopt specific policies, they nevertheless shaped the conditions under which these governments formulated their strategies.

Lawrence Pintak also argues that while television in the region has not been an “agent” of change, it can be used by “architects of change” (2008: 16). Citing the withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon in 2005, Pintak argues that “a complex confluence of events – mediated by television – produced the withdrawal” (ibid.). His argument seems to mirror that of Gadi Wolfsfeld in his ‘political contest model’ which focuses on the role of the media in unequal political conflicts and considers the circumstances in which ‘challengers’ effectively get their media frames across even when an ‘antagonist’ has a significantly superior amount of coercive resources at his disposal (1997: 1-4). Wolfsfeld’s argument, developed from case studies including the press coverage of the first Gulf War, the Palestinian intifada and the Oslo records, argues that whilst ‘antagonists’ have greater access to and power over media narratives, news media retain a “large stock of anti-authority frames” for challengers who have the skill to use them (ibid.5). Even though such ‘contests’ may be exceptions, Wolfsfeld insists that they deserve attention by researchers looking to explore the relationship between media and political power.

Pintak is quick to recognise the limitations of transnational media in the Arab world, asserting that the emerging model is a,

“corporate feudal model of media ownership, with television shifting from governmental control to the control of powerful business interests closely aligned with – or part of – existing authoritarian regimes” (2008: 23).
As such, he contends that whilst transnational networks “may be helping to fuel political reform” they remain at the same time “a prisoner of those reforms” (ibid.). However, beyond political reform, Pintak suggests that the transnational media have become the new “battlefields” of the Arab world where confrontations are waged, supplementing traditional bloody wars. The author argues that the assassination of Lebanese MP Pierre Gemayel in 2006 would have, in the past, reignited Lebanon’s sectarian strife (Gemayel having been the representative of the Phalangist Party heavily involved in Lebanon’s civil wars). However, the reaction manifested in rallies and demonstrations, by his followers in the first instance and then, in return, by Hezbollah. Pintak argues that “For the moment, the power of the camera had trumped the power of the gun” (2008: 17).

Thus, cautious optimists acknowledge the limitations imposed by ownership and financing of transnational broadcasters, but they argue that their ability to provide credible information that transcends national boundaries and facilitate greater freedom of expression ultimately allows the negotiation of public argument and the mobilisation of social and civic networks. Sakr explains that,

“...as channels for the dissemination of information increase and the costs of transmitting data fall, struggles will focus less on control over the ability to transmit information and more on the creation and destruction of credibility” (2001: 100).

As previously noted, discussions on the transnational Arabic public sphere, as those outlined here, conceptualize the satellite news networks as mediums of creation, not mediation. Therefore, transnational news broadcasters are ‘blamed’ or ‘celebrated’ for their ability or inability to facilitate the ‘emergence’ of an Arabic public sphere. Only two studies so far have contributed empirically to these debates; Khatib (2007) and Tesdell’s (2009) papers, unique for their empirical grounding, also contribute to understanding transnational news media as forums of mediation for Arabic public spheres, rather than the ‘space’ of Arabic public spheres per se. They do so by portraying the ways in which new media in the Arab world incorporated (rather than created) civil society activism.

First, Khatib’s examination of the news coverage of the Beirut demonstrations following the assassination of Prime Minister Rafik Hariri was concerned with the role ‘ascribed’ to the demonstrating public. She argues that the news coverage challenged dominant positions that
assign a separation between the roles of ‘audience’ and ‘citizen’. In fact, Khatib illustrates how protestors became creators of media messages through the use of placards, religious symbols and the Lebanese flag. As such, the audience/citizen played an active role in the framing of the news story, becoming not just ‘active’ but ‘acting’, thus blurring the lines between media spectatorship, consumption and citizenship (2007: 34-35). Whilst Khatib admits that the existence of such a public sphere might have been ‘short lived’, her case study remains insightful in transforming prevalent understandings of what it is to participate in a public sphere, and what it means to be an Arab citizen today.

Teddell’s (2009) investigation looks at the use of a different transnational medium in the mobilisation of social and civic networks in the Arab world: the internet. With the Israeli invasion of Gaza (launched on December 27, 2008) as his case study, Teddell looks at the ways in which a number of Jordanian bloggers were able to mobilize a ‘viral marketing movement’ that was sustained throughout the four week invasion. By exploring the link between the virtual and the actual, Teddell traces how blog links, trackbacks, Facebook invites, SMS messages and Watwets (an Arabic language Twitter-like service) enabled roughly forty to fifty tons of donations (food and clothes) to be raised in a matter of days. He continues to explain that “hundreds” of volunteers, also notified through the online tools above, spent weeks packing and shipping these donations (2009: 4-5). The internet, therefore, served as a forum of mediation that brought citizens (who did not personally know each other but were committed to a common cause) together and allowed them to protest the Israeli invasion, at least symbolically, in a state where traditional means of protest (like demonstrations) remain constricted.

As noted, Khatib and Teddell’s studies offer empirical investigations, much lacking in the field, that contribute to understanding how the political public spheres mediated via transnational channels (both broadcast and internet) function in the Arab world. Given that both Khatib and Teddell’s case studies revealed that the transnational media acted as forums of mediation, while agency was found to belong to the citizen, makes the ways in which citizens participate and engage within civil society, in its myriad forms, all the more relevant. It is in this light that this thesis seeks to answer two questions relating to the portrayal of citizens on the news; firstly, the ‘how’ of citizen participation explores whether citizens were asked to share their observations, feelings and frustrations over the electoral process and proceedings from afar (thus giving credence to the arguments pertaining to ‘venting’ and ‘peripheral participation’), or whether they were provided with a mediated platform to discuss issues and
Chapter V:
News coverage of the elections in context

Deliberate on policies relevant to their everyday lives (thus giving them at least little leverage in the formation of public opinion and defining the public good). The second research question sought to explore ‘when’ citizens were included in the coverage of the elections as well as ‘when’ they were excluded from participating. As with the first research question, the ‘when’ of citizen participation facilitates an empirical investigation into the portrayed role of citizens in public life, including when that role is seen as ending. As such, it further contributes to exploring the ‘apparent’ publicness of transnational news networks. The results and discussion of the empirical investigation is provided in the next chapter; first, it is necessary to understand the framework within which the case study was explored: the Jordanian parliamentary elections of November 2007.

The Jordanian parliamentary elections of November 2007: an overview

As noted in Chapter III, the choice of a national election was an attempt to counter trends stipulating that the extensive news coverage of regional issues characteristic of satellite news networks in the Arab world actually sidetracks from focusing on national issues, especially those relating to reform. It is important to recognize that coverage of elections in general, and the spaces provided for citizen participation in particular, do not constitute typical news stories. For example, they are seldom ‘breaking news’ events, having been scheduled months in advance. However, investigating the news coverage of a local national election allows us to understand the relationship between news media, political reform and mediated publicness in the Arab world, as well as the ‘space’ and ‘role’ allocated the citizen in this relationship. An overview of the November 2007 parliamentary elections follows.

On 21st August 2007 Jordanian Prime Minister Ma’rouf al-Bakhit announced that his government was arranging for parliamentary elections to be held before the end of November 2007, the 15th such elections in the country’s history. The announcement came at a time when the relationship between the government and the main opposition party, the Islamic Action Front (IAF), was at an all time low. A month prior to al-Bakhit’s announcement the IAF, the political wing of the regionally active Muslim Brotherhood, had withdrawn from Jordan’s first ever municipal elections in July 2007 just a few hours into the opening of the polls after accusing the government of vote rigging in certain districts. The government responded that the IAF decision to withdraw was ‘staged’ after the party realised its weak performance in the polls.
The lead up to the national elections was therefore understandably tense. The government insisted that it was going to hold ‘free and fair’ national elections, and argued that it had set up a sophisticated computer network scheme to curb voting violations. However, the government denied Jordanian civil society institutions their request to monitor the elections independently, and only allowed those institutions willing to monitor the process under the umbrella of the government-funded National Centre for Human Rights (NCHR). And while sixteen civil society institutions agreed to do so, reports indicated that their access was limited to 146 out of 3995 polling centres (NCHR 10/1/2008).

In addition, the government was accused of turning a blind eye to the practice of ‘vote-buying’ taking place across the kingdom. Candidates running for the elections were reportedly paying between JD 20 – 200 to citizens promising to vote for them (al-Syjjyl 22/11/07). While laws exist to counter such practices, with any convicted party receiving a minimum three months jail term and/or a monetary fine, no candidate was prosecuted for vote-buying even though the practice was widespread and being carried out openly.

Electoral law

The Jordanian parliament is made up of two bodies; a lower house comprising 110 representatives elected directly by Jordanian citizens, and an upper house made up of fifty five senators appointed by the King. Together the two houses form the legislative branch of government and are responsible for drafting and amending laws and regulations and for monitoring the work of the executive branch of government (in the form of the prime minister and his ministerial cabinet).

The prime minister is appointed by the King, and he then forms a ministerial cabinet that serves as the executive branch of government. The ministerial cabinet is required to present a draft policy statement to the house of parliament for a vote of confidence which needs to be accepted by an absolute majority. The lower house of representatives has the power to revoke the cabinet’s policy statement, the ministerial team as a whole, or individual ministers within the executive government at any time.
Of the 110 lower house seats, nine are reserved for Christians and three are reserved for the Circassian and Chechen minorities. Also, a minimum of six seats are reserved for women candidates under a law now known as the ‘quota system’. The quota system was introduced in 2003 to facilitate the participation of women in parliament in an effort to counter their underrepresentation. Prior to 2003 only two women were directly elected into parliament (one in a by-election and the other through the minority seats reserved for Circassians).

The quota system is calculated as a single national district, meaning that all female candidates that fail to win seats through direct competition in their constituencies are automatically given another chance by allowing the six female candidates with the highest percentage of votes in their constituency to enter parliament.

The 110 lower house seats are distributed over forty five districts. However, the distribution of these districts in comparison to population size is disturbingly disproportionate, as rural and tribal areas with very small population numbers enjoy significant overrepresentation in parliament at the expense of densely populated urban cities, which also tend to be more politicised. This gerrymandering of election districts is seen to be favourable to the indigenous Jordanians while underrepresenting the large number of Jordanian citizens of Palestinian origin - that is refugees from the two Diasporas of 1948 and 1967 - who were granted Jordanian citizenship by the late King Hussein. However, this ethnic divide is also a consequence of the urban/rural disparity in electoral representation; rural districts are over-represented in parliament at the expense of urban districts (where Palestinian Jordanians are also more prevalent). It is important to note that Jordanians in rural districts perceive themselves to be economically marginalised due to the lack of services and development in comparison to the country’s urban centres.

Jordanian economist Yusuf Mansur highlighted some of these discrepancies in an article published in the *Jordan Times* in which he notes that the Karak Governorate with its 0.17 million inhabitants is represented by ten seats in the Lower House, while the Mafraq Governorate, with a higher population size of 0.179 million, is only represented by four seats. Mansur went on to note that the Jordanian capital, Amman, “…with 40 per cent of the population and 90 per cent of economic activity, has only 20 per cent of the say in the legislative branch of government” (Mansur 20/11/2007).
Also, Jordan’s controversial one-person one-vote law, introduced as a temporary law in 1993, is seen to favour tribal candidates who run as independents over the candidates fielded by Jordan’s political parties. The one-person one-vote formula allows citizens to vote for only one candidate in their constituency, even if there is more than one seat allocated that constituency. This effectively prevents political parties from running lists of candidates in Jordan’s districts as voters only have one choice (David M. DeBartolo 27/4/2007). When the law was introduced, it effectively marginalised the IAF and Islamist candidates who had retained the largest political bloc in the previous election of 1989. When only allowed to vote for one candidate, most Jordanian citizens chose to vote for their tribal representatives; when given a choice they had voted according to both tribal loyalties and ideological preferences.

The gerrymandering of election districts together with the one person-one vote law, militates against the possibility of a politically independent parliament. As a result, Jordanian elections produce parliaments which are ideologically salient, tribal and conservative, and dominated by personas not political pluralism.

Political parties and campaigns

Jordan resumed its parliamentary life in 1989 after a twenty two year suspension, and political parties – which were banned in 1957 – were legalised again in 1992. However, fifteen years after their legalisation, political parties remain weak and idle (with the exception of the IAF). Prior to the November 2007 elections, the number of registered political parties was thirty seven, most of which can be classified as communist or nationalist parties.

The IAF was the only political party to field candidates for the 2007 elections who ran under a unified political agenda. The twenty two IAF candidates (including one woman) ran on an agenda that covered domestic, regional and international issues. The National Democratic Stream, a coalition of four nationalist and left-wing political parties, also fielded seven candidates, but each of them campaigned independently. The remaining 856 candidates ran and campaigned independently. The total number of female candidates was 199.

As a result, with most candidates having no political affiliations, the campaigns leading up to the election were policy-desolate. They rarely produced real debate on the issues
affecting Jordanian citizens or proposed solutions to tackle them (again, with the exception of the IAF). Campaigns by independent candidates were self-funded and according to *al-Ghad* newspaper, the 885 candidates spent a total of JD 1.9 million on radio, press and television advertising alone, that is, not including the cost of the more traditional campaign advertising through street signs, posts and banners (al-Mubaydeen 21/11/2007). Mansur reported that the average overall cost of each campaign was JD 100,000 per candidate (Mansur 20/11/2007). A report by the Jordanian Committee for Democratic Culture Adalah Sharakah notes that the law stipulates no restrictions on the amount of money spent by candidates on their campaigns, nor does it prescribe the size or amount of ads they are allowed to publish (2007: 20). In addition, they report that some newspapers and websites did not comply with the official campaign period, and many campaign ads were featured on media outlets prior to the date set by the High Commission for Elections (*ibid.*).

Serving as a representative in Jordan’s lower house is considered very lucrative financially; successful candidates receive a ‘lifelong’ monthly salary of JD 1500, meaning that they continue to receive the monthly salary even after their parliamentary cycle is over. In addition MPs are eligible to claim up to JD 460 in monthly expenses. In June 2008 the Jordanian parliament ratified further expense claims, raising the MPs monthly allowances to JD 2460 (al-Ghad 25/6/2008), whilst Jordan’s minimum wage remained set at JD 115 per month.

**Election Results**

Of the 3.4 million eligible Jordanian voters, 2.5 million registered to vote. Registering to vote ended in the first week of July 2007, even before the date for the national elections was announced. Of the 2.5 million registered voters, 54% cast their votes across the country (less than 40% of total eligible voters). The highest turnout was registered in Tafileh with 81% of registered voters casting their votes, and the lowest was recorded in the city of Zarqa with a mere 36.566% of registered voters turning up to vote (al-Kutamein 22/11/2007).

The IAF registered the lowest number of wins since the revival of parliamentary life in Jordan in 1989. Of its twenty two candidates, only six succeeded into parliament, compared to seventeen in the previous parliamentary cycle (2003-2007). The IAF did not win any seats in the city of Zarqa, a traditional Islamist stronghold, and only won two of the eight seats it competed
for in the capital Amman. In addition, none of the seven candidates fielded by the National Democratic Stream succeeded in their bids.

In a statement released by the IAF, the party noted numerous voting violations recorded by its election committee. Included in the list of violations was the transfer of votes as well as the transfer of voters (including military personnel), vote buying, allowing unregistered and underage citizens to vote, and inserting large amounts of voting ballots into polling boxes (IAF 20/11/2007). Nevertheless, the IAF did not withdraw from the national elections as they had in the municipal elections, and a few days later, the Muslim Brotherhood (the social organization that informs the IAF’s platform) dissolved its Shura Council and started arranging for internal elections to take place within the next six months.

Falak al-Jamaani was the only female candidate to be elected directly into parliament by her constituency, which brought the total number of female representatives in the lower house of parliament to seven. In the previous parliamentary cycle, al-Jamaani had served in parliament under the quota system (she failed to win in her constituency but accumulated a high enough percentage of votes to allow her to enter parliament through the seats allocated to woman). This time she won her seat outright through direct competition with more than 1000 votes separating her from her rival (male) candidate running for the same constituency.

Discussion

According to two tracking and one exit poll carried out by the Jordan Centre for Social Research (JCSR), an independent and non-profit Jordanian institution, the poor performance of the Islamist party was not surprising. The JCSR study, which covered six districts nationwide, showed that the IAF was expected to win 7.4% of the votes in these districts, amounting to two out of the six seats to which the IAF had fielded candidates (JCSR 2008: 4). The study did, however, register inconsistencies. One of the IAF candidates running for Amman’s 3rd district was leading in both tracking polls and the exit poll, and the JCSR study indicated that he would come second in the constituency as a ‘sure winner’ (JCSR 2008: 17). Official results put him in 5th place, thereby losing to a candidate marked as ‘unlikely’ by the polls.
However, even after taking into consideration voting irregularities, the JCSR study reported that the IAF voter base, which made up 16.7% of the total votes cast nationwide in the 2003 elections, fell to 6.6% of the total votes in the 2007 election. JCSR attributed the poor performance of the IAF to voter considerations and priorities. The study reported that the factor of ‘religiosity and party affiliation’ scored lowest in importance among polled voters and was preceded by ‘family and tribal links’ as well as ‘service provision’. The noted exception was Amman’s 3rd district where voting according to tribal relations scored low.

In addition, Khaled Hroub (2007) attributed the weak performance of the IAF to two other reasons. Firstly, he described a growing public rejection of Islamist slogans and ideology as a result of their regional conduct and performance, especially affected by Hamas’s actions in Gaza. Secondly, Hroub noted that the IAF alienated its own member base when it replaced the ‘hawkish’ list of candidates voted for internally within the party with a more ‘conciliatory’ and ‘moderate’ list of candidates. In addition, another related reason may be the increasingly external-issue influence of IAF manifestos, with Palestine and Iraq being the dominant duo (2007: http://www.arab-reform.net/). Ironically, whilst the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood, the first of its regional sister organizations to adopt internal issues was shifting outward, the Moroccan and Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood organizations started moving inward, and became increasingly popular in their societies as a result (Brown 2006: 9).

In terms of voter turnout, the official announcement placed it at 54% of registered voters, which corresponds to 39.7% of total eligible voters. The low turnout in the capital led the government to extend voting by two hours in Amman’s 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th and 6th constituencies.

The gerrymandering of voting districts, discussed earlier, along with discrepancies in voter turnout, challenge further the representativeness of the lower house of parliament. For example, the governorate of Tafileh, which recorded the highest ratio of voter turnout, has a population of 0.0801 million (1.4% of the total population) and is represented by five seats in parliament. On the other hand, the governorate that recorded the lowest voter turnout, the city of Zarqa, has a population of 0.8527 million (14.9% of the total population) and is represented by ten seats in parliament. In other words, citizens in Tafileh – who turned out to vote enthusiastically - are five times more represented in parliament than their counterparts in Zarqa. Youth turnout was also low, according to the same JCSR study. Only 34% of registered
youth voters between the ages of 18-29 took part in the elections, even after numerous campaigns by the government and civil society institutions aimed at encouraging youth participation.

Such trends seem to indicate growing political apathy among Jordanian citizens, including the youth who make up the largest age group in the Kingdom. It also indicates a correlation between voter apathy in constituencies marginalised by the electoral law, and active engagement in constituencies overrepresented in parliament. Furthermore, when Jordanian citizens do vote, as has been noted above, political and ideological factors no longer guide their choice.

Most detrimentally, as Hroub potently argues, the defeat of Jordan’s Islamists has produced a large ‘political vacuum’ because it was not the consequence of the rise of a rival political current. Rather, the void left by the IAF’s defeat has been ‘filled’ by a loose alliance of tribal leaders, wealthy businessmen, and old-guard officials, with no political platforms or affiliations (2007: http://www.arab-reform.net/).

The Jordanian November elections have therefore produced a traditionalist pro-government parliament with no political, economic or social agenda. It is therefore not surprising that when the newly appointed Prime Minister Nader al-Dahabi presented his twenty seven ministerial cabinet and their policy statement to the house of parliament on 16 December 2007 for a vote of confidence, the ministerial cabinet received a ‘record high’ vote of 97 out of 110 – or what was dubbed by the Jordanian press as the ‘golden trust’. This ‘golden trust’ ironically corresponded to very trying experiences on the level of the polity; government subsidies on fuel and basic foods were soon lifted and many Jordanian citizens were left struggling to maintain their deteriorating living standards in a country where wages have barely increased over the last few years, unemployment is rampant and poverty is on the rise.

On the issue of gender politics, supporters of the quota system noted a positive trend when one of the previous quota representatives, al-Jamaani, managed to win outright through direct competition. Another female candidate who served with al-Jamaani under the quota system in the previous parliament, Nariman al-Rousan, was also just fourteen votes short of winning her constituency seat through direct competition. Al-Rousan still managed to enter parliament again through the quota system.
However, just like the election law, the quota system remains undermined by the uneven distribution of districts and seats. The female winners are chosen according to the percentage of votes received in the candidate’s own constituency and not the absolute number of votes received (or indeed the percentage of votes received nationally). This makes it quite easy for women in small districts to win a seat in parliament with a very small number of votes, while other female candidates with much higher results fail to enter parliament. To illustrate the point, although al-Jamaani won her seat through direct competition in her constituency, she did so with 3301 votes, while the IAF’s female candidate, Hayat al-Massimi, received 3756 votes in her Zarqa Governorate – the highest number of votes given a female candidate, but failed to win a seat neither through direct competition nor through the quota system. At the same time, a female candidate from Amman’s 3rd district received 2068 votes, but failed to win a seat through the quota system, while a candidate from Karak Governorate successfully won a quota seat in parliament with only 700 votes.

In addition, there is the argument that specifying ‘quota seats’ for women hinders real emancipation by encouraging a culture whereby women vote for women, and men vote for men. Women elected into parliament through the quota are expected to represent women’s issues; such a discourse, in effect, maintains that women are unable to represent an entire constituency in parliament (including its men, women and children) in the same manner that a male MP can.

Many questions were raised by the November 2007 elections: the sincerity of the democratic effort, the consequences of a political vacuum, and the increasingly talked-about role of women in Jordanian public life. Answering these questions, however, will require more than structured arguments. In a country where stability has been an intricate balancing act, and political pluralism a graceful and accommodating dance, political liberalization cannot possibly be measured by numbers or legislation alone. The very basis of Jordanian statehood, the legacy of accommodation, is in fact an exercise that requires reflexivity and flexibility; it requires searching for meaning and possibilities, which, at the very least require a small amount of deliberative reasoning. Thus, answers to questions on the potency of Jordan’s political liberalization may well rest with the meaning makers of this equation: Jordan’s citizens.
Chapter VI: Results and Analysis: the portrayal of citizens on the news and the mediated public sphere

Television is the major institution of the public sphere today; it is the medium through which complex and large societies mediate their experiences, identities and opinions. However, television has seldom lived up to or realised its normative role as a public sphere. Furthermore, as argued by Dahlgren in the previous chapter, the capacity of ‘public sphering’ is increasingly undermined by large and expanding mass media corporations which have made the commodification of public culture pervasive (1995: 23). Yet, whilst television as an institution has its liabilities, Dahlgren insists that we must not ignore its assets (ibid. xi). The need to understand the ‘forms’ and ‘extent’ of ‘public sphering’, or the publicness of mediated public spheres, in this manner also extends to understandings of the Arabic public sphere.

As has been pointed to numerously, this thesis aims to expand and inform conceptualisations of the Arabic public sphere by exploring, empirically, its manifestations in mediated political spheres as well as cultural public spheres. In turn, the thesis consists of two case studies; the first seeks to uncover patterns of citizen portrayal in the news coverage of the Jordanian parliamentary elections of 2007 while the second case study is concerned with the experiential dimension of citizenship as embodied in the performative medium of interactive theatre. This chapter discusses the results and findings of the first case study.

As the previous chapter sought to outline, discussions on the Arabic public sphere have been limited to the mediated and political, and within this field, have produced little empirical grounding beyond the formulation of arguments pertaining to whether a public sphere is, or is not, emerging vis-à-vis the region’s transnational networks. The previous chapter outlined two overarching positions in this regard, identified as the ‘structural sceptics’ and the ‘cautious optimists’; the former dismiss the capacity of transnational media to act as a viable public sphere because of their institutional embeddedness within dominant political institutions, therefore arguing that any ‘apparent’ freedom of expression is in fact a venting mechanism that works towards the maintenance of the status quo. The cautious optimists, on the other hand, while aware of the limitations of the media in the region, insist that the greater political plurality tolerated ‘on air’ facilitates an environment capable of contesting dominant narratives and, at times, effectively mobilizing public opinion. In the Introduction to this thesis, it was noted that
both arguments still approach public spheres as ‘emerging’, and fail to account for the ways in which discourse, contestation and negotiation of meaning are already present in the Arab world.

Chapter III discussed the methodological approaches utilised for the purposes of contributing to current debates on the mediated Arabic public sphere. It outlined the first case study’s aim to contribute to those debates empirically by investigating the ‘forms’ and ‘extent’ of public participation in the news. In other words, the first case study seeks to explore the ways in which citizens were portrayed in the news and what their portrayal signifies about the ‘publicness’ of transnational broadcasters in the region. For this purpose, several different modes of participation were identified in the coverage, ranging from modes of participation that closely embody normative ideals of critical-rational deliberation (‘citizens making proposals’ and ‘citizens discussing issues’) to modes of participation that are non-deliberative, comment-driven and more observatory in nature (‘citizens responding individually’ and ‘citizens repeating official narrative’). Identifying those modes of participation contributed to understanding the different forms of public portrayal on the news, but that in itself does not reveal the ‘extent’ of publicness in terms of the prevalence of the portrayal of different forms of participation, including the dimensions of inclusion and exclusion. For these reasons, the different modes of participation were developed into a Continuum of Participation (Figure III.a) and SPSS was used to create visual representations of the patterns of public portrayal.

This chapter begins by answering questions pertaining to the ‘how’ and ‘when’ of citizen participation in the news coverage of the elections. The former question seeks to uncover the nature of participation portrayed and delineate trends on the ascribed role of citizens in the coverage; thus, it seeks to reveal whether Jordanian citizens were given a platform to discuss and highlight their issues, even make proposals and participate in policy debate, or whether they were represented as observers and commentators whose role is limited to that of voting. The ‘how’ question also considers the prevalence of different forms of participation and how portrayal varies across gender. The second research question relates to the ‘when’ of public participation and seeks to uncover when citizens were included in the coverage and when they were excluded from it. Following the ‘how’ and ‘when’ questions, the chapter will discuss the implication of the portrayal of citizens in the news coverage, both in terms of the spaces afforded for participation and the roles allocated the public in the process. This discussion will also approach each channel individually, and draw conclusions about what the representation of citizens on air can tell us about wider political processes in the region and the perceived
definition of what it means to be a citizen in the Arab world today. Finally, the chapter will discuss the gendering of the political public sphere and the relationship between the portrayal of female citizens on the news and larger questions about women’s rights in Jordan.

The ‘how’ and ‘when’ of citizen participation

Initial content analysis results revealed that a total of 108 citizen vox-pops were aired during the data sample, distributed between the four broadcasters as follows: al-Jazeera 10 (9.3% of total), al-Arabiya 11 (10.2%), al-Hurra 15 (13.9%) and JTV 72 (66.7%). In addition, all four channels aired more male vox-pops than female vox-pops; of the total number of citizen vox-pops aired 76 were male (70.4%) and 32 were female (29.6%). Table VI.a below illustrates the differences between the channels.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Channel</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>al-Jazeera</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% within Channel</td>
<td>60.0%</td>
<td>40.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of Total</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
<td>9.3%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>al-Arabiya</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% within Channel</td>
<td>81.8%</td>
<td>18.2%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of Total</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
<td>10.2%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Al-Hurra</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
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</tr>
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<td>% within Channel</td>
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<tr>
<td>JTV</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% within Channel</td>
<td>70.8%</td>
<td>29.2%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of Total</td>
<td>47.2%</td>
<td>19.4%</td>
<td>66.7%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter VI: Results & analysis – citizens on the news

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% within Channel</th>
<th>70.4%</th>
<th>29.6%</th>
<th>100.0%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% of Total</td>
<td>70.4%</td>
<td>29.6%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
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Table VI.a: Crosstabulation; channels & gender

[Table produced from data using SPSS]

To interpret these initial results it is necessary to make a distinction between what Deacon et al. (1999) identify as ‘media presence’ and ‘media access’. The authors point out that quantifying the number of times certain actors appear in the news can only be seen to represent to what extent these actors were the subject of news coverage – not how much news access they have (1999: 122). In such a light, JTV, Jordan’s state-run broadcaster, is seen to have allowed citizens significant presence in the election coverage, featuring them more prominently than the rest of the channels. This generous space can be seen to signify an inclination to engage with public opinion, but it does not inform us about how much access citizens have in the formulation of that opinion. The rest of the channels, however, included citizens much more sporadically in their coverage, indicating that while elections are normatively understood as the manifestation of representative governance through public choice, the articulation and negotiation of that choice was not a prominent feature of the election coverage on the regional and foreign owned transnational media.

Secondly, the disproportionate representation of male to female vox-pops in the coverage of the elections needs to also be understood through the context of presence rather than access. The overrepresentation of male citizens at the expense of female citizens suggests that transnational news media may be maintaining the status quo of cultural inequality between the sexes. In legal terms, Jordanian women are free to vote and run for parliament just like their male counterparts; however, the underrepresentation of female citizens in the vox-pops may be seen to represent a cultural inequality of sorts: women are either less likely to be approached by journalists for their perspectives, or they are less willing to participate in such a medium of their own accord.

In order to understand how this presence of citizens translates into access, we must turn to the ‘how’ of citizen participation: how were citizens presented in the news in terms of the nature of their participation? Was their presence a symbolic gesture or did it enable meaningful access that helped citizens make demands, set the agenda, and seek justice?
Answering these questions will ultimately shed light on the nature of the Arabic public sphere, its viability, and the kind of publics it sustains.

To do so, the 108 citizen vox-pops from the data sample were coded into SPSS. Initial results revealed that the most deliberative form of representation in the Continuum of Participation (Figure III.a), ‘citizens making proposals’, was the least prevalent mode of participation portrayed in the news coverage across all channels. It only accounted for 1.9% of total vox-pops aired. On the other hand, the most frequently portrayed form of participation was ‘citizens responding individually’, which corresponds to the second weakest form of participation in the continuum, and accounted for 60.2% of the total number of vox-pops aired. Figure VI.b below illustrates the results:

![Figure VI.b: Pie chart; frequency of levels of deliberation within sample](image-url)

[Figure produced from data using SPSS]

1 LD: Level of deliberation
‘Citizens responding individually’, the most frequently occurring mode of participation in the coverage, included vox-pops in which citizens shared their observations on the electoral campaigns, described personal voting preferences or their voting experiences, and so on. It also included vox-pops in which citizens described the basis on which they were planning on casting their votes, but only those who did so without referring to particular policies or issues. It was therefore driven by commentary that is observatory in nature and individually-oriented. Examples include:

“In general the situation is very comforting, calm and organised, masha’allah [God Bless] even when you first enter the election room, the voting hall, you really feel relaxed and at ease because generally everything is good and well insha’allah [God willing]”. Female, al-Jazeera, 20 November 2007.

“We have candidates who are hosting big gatherings, in big headquarters, offering feasts and a lot of other things.” Male, al-Arabiya, 7 November 2007.

Comments coded under ‘citizens responding individually’ often represented very weak engagement with normative democratic behaviour. The following two comments on the role of political parties in parliament are a case in point. They reveal little understanding of the role of political parties in public representation and portray Jordanian citizens as more likely to vote according to particular interest:

“We are not interested in political parties, we vote for the man we feel is appropriate for the position.” Male, JTV, 9 November 2007.

“We don’t care about the candidate being a member of a political party or not, we don’t know all the political parties and are only familiar with a few. What we care about is the candidate voicing our concerns to those in charge.” Male, JTV, 9 November 2007.

In other instances, this weak engagement with normative democratic voting behaviour was explained matter-of-factly as a social-cultural obligation:

“In some areas [electoral campaigns] may have a big impact, in other areas they have no impact at all. Especially in cities a candidate must have a big election campaign, but in towns this is not the case because a candidate is voted in according to his tribal affiliation. The way your tribe chooses to vote, you vote, regardless of election
campaigns. If a candidate belongs to a big tribe, he will succeed, if he belongs to a small tribe he will lose.” Male, al-Jazeera, 16 November 2007.

The most obvious conclusion is therefore that whilst citizens were present in the coverage of elections, particularly in JTV’s news reports, their portrayal did not translate into meaningful forms of access. In over half of all vox-pops, citizens were represented as peripheral commentators and observers, rather than an engaged public negotiating and discussing issues pertaining to their society. They were also represented as demonstrating little understanding of or engagement with normative democratic behaviour, instead choosing to vote on particular, familial grounds.

In comparison, the second most frequently portrayed mode of participation was ‘citizens commenting on issues’ which included vox-pops where citizens outlined the problems in their district that they wanted addressed, such as unemployment, education, poverty and so on, or discussed issues relating to the elections, such as the political parties law, gender, tribalism, and so on, although they did so without going into policy formulation or discussing how these issues need to be addressed. Some of those vox-pops were thus not so much deliberative as they were overt in making demands for specific regions. For example, a senior citizen from the constituency of al-Hissa’ in the Southern governorate of al-Tafilah was portrayed on JTV demanding services specifically for his tribe:

“I demand a military hospital in the district of al-Hissa’, the constituency of al-Hissa’. We ask for military schools for our children as tribal members are unable to teach their children in public schools.” Male, JTV, 16 November 2007.

However, the majority of vox-pops coded under this mode of participation, while only accounting for 24.1% of vox-pops in the coverage, displayed an understanding of issues as inherently ‘public’ thereby revealing an engagement with the ‘common good’ and other normative democratic ideals like critical-rational participation (if not deliberation). Within ‘citizens commenting on issues’ several themes and issues were identified, again revealing a commitment to ‘public issues’ and the ‘common good’ as a concern to all citizens, rather than a particular group. Examples of issues portrayed as ‘public issues’ include: deteriorating living standards and unemployment and, to a lesser extent, health and education.
“We request that the coming parliament addresses the deteriorating economic situation, particularly poverty and basic living costs which are spiralling. These are the most important issues, as well as unemployment, I mean this is a problem for me and indeed for every university graduate, it’s a ghost that haunts us.” Male, JTV, 18 November 2007.

“We ask the candidates launching all these election campaigns to concentrate immediately on the issue of medical services and health insurance, for the youth especially. The recently graduated youths are finding it very difficult to make ends meet at the moment. We also ask the MPs to pay attention to the issue of education. Currently, private schools, the private schools they are a big drain on us and on the Jordanian citizen, we need more public schools.” Male, JTV, 11 November 2007.

“The challenges we want addressed are firstly invigorating the middle class for the sake of the citizen and abetting the prevalent unemployment by creating more vocational centres” Male, al-Arabiya, 21 November 2007.

Less frequently, vox-pops coded under ‘citizens commenting on issues’ addressed policy issues related to the political process itself. An example is the following comment aired on JTV in which a citizen laments the obscure presence of political parties in the election campaign period:

“Political party affiliated candidates are absent because our political parties have failed to produce effective policy statements and plans. Candidates affiliated with political parties are campaigning as independents not political party candidates, and they do this so as not to lose their tribal support.” Male, JTV, 9 November 2007.

Yet, whilst ‘commenting on issues’, as the second most frequently portrayed mode of participation in the continuum, reveals notable engagement with issues of public concern through commentary approaching the ideal of critical-rational argument, its portrayal of who the public is and who speaks on its behalf were found to be problematic. As the crosstabulation in Appendix II illustrates, the mode of participation is clearly gendered, with males were much more likely than females to be portrayed ‘commenting on issues’. Male vox-pops coded under
‘citizens commenting on issues’ made up 80.8% of all vox-pops coded under this mode of participation, while Jordanian females were only portrayed ‘commenting on issues’ in five instances. Of those five instances, four vox-pops portrayed women commenting on issues specific to gender politics. This finding will be elaborated on further down in the chapter, but it reveals a picture whereby females are represented as capable of addressing gender issues, whilst the process of identifying ‘public’ issues, and implicitly, the capacity to speak on behalf of the public as a whole, remain male-attributed roles.

The third most frequently occurring mode of participation was ‘citizens engaging emotionally’ and it included instances where citizens expressed their apathy, frustration, hopelessness and helplessness with the electoral process as a whole or the candidates running in particular. A recurring theme that emerged within the category was ‘broken promises’; citizens frequently referred to candidates who disregarded all the promises they had made to their constituents once they succeed into parliament:

“All the previous parliamentarians they all came and we gave them our votes, they told us we want to do this and that and we want to work on this, but after they have our votes and they succeed they sit on their parliamentary seat and they do not serve us in any way.” Female, JTV, 18 November 2007

“All these manifestos they are ink on paper, empty words, when the candidate becomes an MP he will not bother.” Male, al-Hurra, 14 November 2007.

Beyond voicing their disillusionment with individual parliamentary performance of candidates, some vox-pops also signified a more critical disposition towards the electoral process more generally, even if such criticism was expressed through references to frustration and hopelessness. Therefore, vox-pops coded under this mode of participation can be understood to demonstrate a critical attitude towards the political process in its current form. Examples include,

“There is no running candidate who can truly represent the people of Ma’an or represent my positions to the government.” Male, al-Hurra, 18 November 2007.

“Now if you pass by all the headquarters [of candidates] you will find them empty, you won’t find anyone, the people have given up.” Male, al-Arabiya, 19 November 2007.
“The people no longer believe in the flashy promises [offered by candidates]; see for yourself, look around at the street banners and all you see are flashy mottos which will not feed people bread” Male, al-Arabiya, 19 November 2007 (it is worthy to note that bread is the staple Jordanian food item; this comment signifies that even bread is expensive for citizens nowadays).

The two modes of engagement at the furthest sides of the continuum were the least frequently portrayed modes of participation. ‘Citizens repeating official narrative’, classified as the least deliberative mode of engagement, was only portrayed in the coverage of JTV and did not appear in any of the other transnational broadcasters. It included vox-pops where citizens spoke of elections in general detached terms, often quoting expressions used by government officials. Examples include citizens describing the elections as an ‘embodiment of Jordanian democracy’, a ‘democratic wedding’, or a ‘fulfilment of the desires and directives of King Abdullah’ as well as using slogans associated with official government campaigns aimed at boosting voter turnout (such as ‘the right person for the right post’ and ‘the youth are our agents of change’):

“His Majesty King Abdullah II has instilled democracy for individuals in this society, so that we all have the right to vote and to choose the right man for the right post” Male, JTV, 10 October 2007.

“We are, as his Majesty the King has called us, the agents of change. So I ask all students across all universities who are eligible to vote to do so.” Female, JTV, 16 November 2007.

On the other hand, ‘citizens making proposals’ included vox-pops which were policy driven and deliberative, proposing changes to law, policies or culture, and identifying alternative solutions. It is the only mode of participation in the continuum that realises both the critical-rational criteria of a normative public sphere. It was also the least frequently portrayed mode of participation, with only 1.9% of vox-pops coded under this mode.

“For example this is the third district it has four seats, three Muslim seats and one Christian seat, so when I go and vote for one person that is in fact one quarter of a vote. So the problem is obvious, this is not acceptable at all, we need a new, modern and
contemporary law because this current law we are voting on I swear it would not pass as legitimate in any corner of the world.” Male, al-Jazeera, 20 November 2007.

Therefore, findings discussed so far reveal three trends; first, citizens were only included sporadically in the coverage of the elections (with the exception of JTV). Second, males were disproportionately represented in the citizen vox-pops. Third, exploring ‘how’ citizens were portrayed in the news reveals that citizens were largely portrayed as observers and commentators of the electoral process, not as integral participants in defining, negotiating and discussing its related issues and policies. Vox-pops also demonstrated weak engagement with normative democratic ideals and represented citizens as non-discerning publics who voted primarily according to tribal and particular affiliations. Such peripheral modes of participation accounted for over 60% of all vox-pops in the coverage.

Other modes of participation included ‘citizens commenting on issues’ and ‘citizens engaging emotionally’ which, together, accounted for 34.3% of vox-pops in the coverage (24.1% and 10.2% respectively). While these modes of participation portrayed citizens in more discerning roles as critical-rational publics (if disillusioned in the case of ‘citizens engaging emotionally’), such portrayal did not amount to public deliberation in the normative sense. Also, as will be explored further on, both these modes of participation raise issues relating to the gendering of the mediated public sphere.

A fourth finding that emerges relates to the ‘when’ question identified earlier in the chapter. Examining the ‘when’ of citizen participation, by identifying when citizens were included in the news and when they were excluded from the coverage, aimed to uncover further the role ascribed to them on the transnational media. This required an examination of the distribution of citizen vox-pops across the data sample, beginning two weeks prior to the elections and ending two weeks after it. Results indicated that citizens were only included in the coverage during the run-up to the elections, after which they were almost entirely excluded from the coverage, and implicitly, from a say in the implications of the elections, including defining the issues and policies they wished their new parliament to address. Figure VI.c below illustrates the discrepancy.
The graph clearly demonstrates that while citizens were invited to participate in the coverage of the elections in the ‘run-up’ period, this trend was largely reversed after election day, and citizens were thereafter nearly completely excluded from the coverage (only one citizen vox-pop was aired after November 21st, 2009). Notably, this exclusion of citizen voices occurred although the Jordanian elections (and other related local political events) continued to be covered by the news channels. Thus, the role of citizens was portrayed as ‘ending’ with the act of voting. This trend was true across all channels.

The implication of this finding is the apparent marginalisation of citizens from engagement and deliberation in their own affairs; their participation is only afforded the ‘choice’ of a candidate’s name, and so reaches its climax on election day. Citizen opinions are sought
prior to the balloting as a vicarious exercise to ‘increase’ voting percentages, but their engagement with issues and their capacity to voice opinions on the policy agenda post election day is limited. This implication is reinforced by the relatively constant coverage of Jordanian politics during the two weeks post the elections. Rather than facilitate public deliberation and the formation of public argument, as is normatively expected of transnational media in their disputed role as mediums of the Arabic public sphere, the transnational media’s coverage of the Jordan elections implies a role more akin to gate keeping, and with a tendency to closure. Therefore, when the newly appointed Jordanian Prime Minister and his ministerial cabinet were widely described by the local press and transnational media as ‘technocrats’, the Jordanian citizens were excluded from participating in defining what this meant for them. This very description of the new government, coupled with the exclusion of citizen deliberation from transnational public spheres, suggests that policy decisions are still being formulated, in their entirety, behind closed doors.

Melucci has argued that ‘exploitation’ is not a product of the lack of information, but rather, a form of ‘exclusion from the power of naming’ (1996 cited in Stevenson 2003: 182). As such, while stories related to parliamentary life in Jordan continued to be covered (no lack of information), Jordanian citizens were excluded from the ‘power of naming’. To Melucci, this affords the already-powerful further control over ‘dominant discourses and frameworks of understanding’ (ibid.). Rami Khoury has described this discrepancy as the remaining “large gap between an informed citizenry and an empowered citizenry” (2006 cited in Pintak 2008: 18). It can then be deduced that this ‘gap’ undermines the capacity of the transnational media in facilitating a viable public sphere; even in a region where public opinion may lack the ‘consequentiality’ necessary to affect public policy, initial trends discussed thus far also reveal that transnational Arabic-language media are not enabling platforms for public contestation or the negotiation of meaning.

Taken together, findings from the empirical case study discussed so far suggest that the presence of citizens has not translated into meaningful forms of access, as citizens are still left out of the processes of deliberation and negotiation of the public good in the aftermath of the elections. Together, those results indicate that the presence of citizens on the Arabic language transnational broadcasters is more scripted than meaningful, and that the publicness of the mediated public sphere is more apparent than real. Citizens are still marginalised from real participation, and exclusions (such as gender) still apply. The disputed transnational Arabic
public sphere, when empirically examined, is found to afford citizens limited roles and shows a tendency towards closure.

Ownership and control; the structural limitations of the mediated public sphere

A recurring theme in discussions of mediated public spheres revolves around the increased inaccessibility and unresponsiveness of media institutions to public interventions. The trend has been linked to the drive towards greater concentration and centralization amongst major media industries, which makes them susceptible to influence by powerful interest groups (Dahlgren 1995: 155). Such arguments have been incorporated into discussions of the Arabic public sphere courtesy of the structural sceptics who point out, rightly, that the transnational media in the Arab world remain prisoners of corporate-feudal interests, either associated with or at the very least closely aligned to existing power structures in the region. The portrayal of citizens in the coverage of the Jordanian elections, both in terms of presence and access, further attests to the arguments of the structural sceptics. Thus far, citizen portrayal appears as a form of tokenism; as Arnstein notes,

“[P]articipation without redistribution of power is an empty and frustrating process for the powerless. It allows the powerholders to claim that all sides were considered, but makes it possible for only some of those sides to benefit. It maintains the status quo.” (1969: 217).

It therefore follows that the chapter considers differences between the channels and the forms of public participation they portrayed. Figure VI.d below illustrates how the portrayal of citizens in the evening bulletins of the four channels in the data sample ranged across the Continuum of Participation. It must be noted that the small size of the sample (al-Jazeera and al-Arabiya for example aired less than a dozen citizen vox-pops each) means that the following discussion should not be considered conclusive, but remains substantial in its contribution to the exploration of media coverage trends. In the absence of empirical studies, the discussion can highlight issues for further examination. Indeed, the very size of the sample, and the fact that citizens were only afforded limited presence and access, remains substantial and indicates a tendency towards peripheral participation and closure.
To explain the graph above: the beige boxes represent the 25th to 75th percentile ranges, or in other words, the large majority of instances of public participation (through citizen vox-pops) aired and recorded. The black whiskers on both sides of the beige boxes connect the smallest and largest values that lie outside the 25th-75th percentiles but are not statistically outlier values. Outlier values are represented as (*) degree signs, and in this case the single outlier value was the citizen vox-pop coded under ‘citizens making proposals’ in al-Jazeera’s coverage. It is worthy to note that only two vox-pops out of the 108 coded portrayed citizens ‘making proposals’, the first was aired on al-Jazeera and the second on al-Hurra. The horizontal black lines inside the boxes represent the median, and its location in the box represents skewness, and in three of the four channels it favours lower levels of deliberation. The levels of deliberation across the vertical axis correspond to those in the Continuum of Participation illustrated in Figure III.a. Results of the cross tabulation which produced the above box plot is attached in Appendix I, and will be referred to in the coming sections.
Chapter VI: Results & analysis – citizens on the news

**JTV**

Jordan Television, run and managed by the Jordanian government, was launched in 1968 as part of the Jordan Radio and Television Broadcasting Corporation (JRTV). The corporation is funded both by public funds as well as advertising revenue. It describes itself on its website as a “Governmental Modern Arabic Public Service platform that caters to local and Pan Arab viewers” (JRTV: [www.jrtv.gov.jo](http://www.jrtv.gov.jo)).

As noted earlier, JTV’s coverage of the elections indicated a clear presence of citizens in the channel’s coverage, a departure from trends noted in the other three transnational broadcasters. A study by the Jordanian Committee for Democratic Culture Adalah Sharakah, which monitored JTV’s coverage in the two weeks preceding the elections, also found it to be largely ‘neutral’ (76.2%) and noted that the coverage focussed on the government preparations and included discussion programmes aimed at incorporating the views of young people and regular citizens (2007: 118). The study also found, however, that there was a significantly greater number of stories coded under ‘positive partiality’ (21.6%; stories mentioning the elections and electoral proceedings positively) than ‘negative partiality’ (2.3%; stories criticising the elections or electoral proceedings); the study concluded that this trend reflects the higher number of stories carrying the perspectives of the government, royal court or other official bodies (*ibid.*; the study did not, however, elaborate on the methodology used to examine positive or negative ‘partiality’). The mentioned discussion programme, called *Soutak Watan* [your voice is worth your country], was anchored and aired live from a different governorate every weekday in the two weeks preceding the elections. To its credit, it did feature a large number of citizens who took part in discussions with government officials as well as among themselves. Yet, the final episode was aired on the day prior to the elections, again reinforcing the exclusion of the citizen from participation and engagement post voting.

Nötzold and Pies (2010) argue that in order to survive in the growing media market, JTV has adopted a strategy of ‘going local’ and paying increased attention to domestic issues (2010: 55- 59). As part of the restructuring process of JTV, the election coverage saw reporters dispatched to the northern city of Irbid and the southern city of Ma’an, a trend the authors stipulate was meant to counterbalance the centrality of the capital Amman in terms of media attention. The authors also point, however, that economic survival is not the sole reason behind the strategy of ‘going local’; they maintain that it is directly related to political
developments in the country, and more precisely the ‘Jordan First’ campaign launched in 2002 with its aim of “promoting ten ‘concepts’ said to be aimed at deepening a sense of ‘national identity’ and fortifying the ‘national fabric’” (2007 interview with chief editor of ad-Dustour paper cited in Nötzold and Pies 2010: 58; he has since become government spokesperson, a role he assumed from December 2009 till July 2010).

Beyond affording citizens significantly greater presence, the box plot above demonstrates that JTV’s coverage did not fare encouragingly in terms of access. As illustrated in the figure, JTV’s coverage did not include any vox-pops portraying ‘citizens making proposals’ at all, whilst it was the only channel to portray citizens ‘repeating official narrative’. This indicates a presence of the lowest end of the continuum in the channel’s coverage but an exclusion of the highest modes of deliberation in the continuum. Within the two ends, the majority of public portrayal on JTV comprised ‘citizens responding individually’ (66.7%), sharing their observations and comments on the electoral process but making no reference to the issues or policies affecting their everyday lives. The more issue based level of deliberation, ‘citizens commenting on issues’ came second in terms of frequency with 25% of JTV’s citizen vox-pops. This is in fact higher than the percentage of such citizen portrayal on al-Jazeera, but lower than the same level of citizen engagement portrayed on al-Arabiya and al-Hurra. These findings therefore suggest that JTV’s commitment to the public sphere, as a self-proclaimed “public service”, falls short of the deliberative normative ideal because the significant and symbolic presence of citizens, whilst showing a tendency to engage public opinion, does not translate into spaces for deliberation and negotiation over issues of public concern; to Arnstein,

“Inviting citizens’ opinions, like informing them, can be a legitimate step toward their full participation. But if consulting them is not combined with other modes of participation, this rung of the ladder is still a sham since it offers no assurance that citizen concerns and ideas will be taken into account... what power holders achieve is the evidence that they have gone through the required motions of involving “those people”.” (1969: 221).

Furthermore, ‘citizens engaging emotionally’ accounted for a mere 2.8% of the total vox-pops aired on the channel. This underrepresentation of frustrated citizens in the coverage suggests that Jordanian voters, over 45% of whom did not vote on election day, were not given a platform to communicate their disappointments and frustrations. An opinion poll carried out
during the build-up to the November elections by the Centre for Strategic Studies at the University of Jordan found that around two thirds of respondents believed their MPs failed to engage with their problems and issues during the last parliamentary cycle (CSS 2007: 15), and that a striking 80.7% of respondents believed their MPs had voted primarily according to opportunities for personal material gain (ibid. 11). This suggests that JTV, while inviting citizens to observe and comment, failed to engage with their political frustrations and to correctly portray a sense of public mood. This suggests that furthering the official line, and encouraging public participation in the electoral process, took ‘editorial’ precedence over facilitating a public sphere where citizen perspectives and concerns could be engaged with especially at times of growing economic hardship and citizen dissatisfaction with parliamentary performance.

Finally, given the significant ‘presence’ of citizen vox-pops in the channel’s news coverage of the elections (making up 66.7% of all vox-pops aired during the data sample), the trend of excluding citizens post election day is most pronounced in JTV’s output. As Figure VI.e below illustrates, until the 21 November, 2007 citizens featured very prominently in JTV’s coverage and 71 vox-pops were aired in the first 15 days of the data sample. In comparison, in the remaining two weeks, only one vox-pop was aired during the coverage of the election’s aftermath, even though stories relating to the elections continued to be covered.
Further analysis of the data reveals a more complex pattern: JTV’s coverage of the elections during the run-up period was largely procedural, focusing on ‘preparing for the elections’ on a national (ministerial) and local (district) levels. It was during such news stories that citizen vox-pops were actively elicited. However, after King Abdullah issued a ‘letter of designation’ appointing Nader al-Dahabi as PM on 22 November 2007 and outlining what issues and policies he expects the new government to address, JTV’s coverage shifted significantly. The channel began to cover each of the policy-initiatives mentioned in the letter on a daily basis, affording them extensive coverage; the topics covered ranged from healthcare, education, transport and housing, to unemployment, poverty and the economy. This reveals that whilst citizens were actively encouraged to comment on the electoral proceedings and preparations, they were almost entirely excluded from engaging with the issues that affect their everyday life.
lives. Thus, rather than allow citizens access to a public sphere, citizens can be seen as playing a role in a predetermined news story.

*al-Arabiya*

Figure VI.d illustrates the close proximity between the portrayal of citizens in the coverage of al-Arabiya and JTJ. Both channels did not portray any citizens ‘making proposals’ at all and both channels’ 25th-75th percentile ranges remained below the ‘citizens commenting on issues’ level of deliberation. The main difference between al-Arabiya and JTJ is that the former did not air any vox-pops portraying citizens ‘repeating official narrative’. Over half of al-Arabiya’s citizen vox-pops (54.5%) accounted for representation under the mode of ‘citizens responding individually’, once again reinforcing the trend to portray citizens as observers of the electoral process whose role is limited to the act of voting; for example,

“I voted, the voting procedures were easy, so we can say the overall standard is good.”

Returning momentarily to Habermas’s conceptualisation of the public sphere, which he described as a place of ‘rational-critical’ deliberation, and applying this description to the continuum of participation, reveals that the highest level of deliberation, ‘citizens making proposals’, is the only one that fulfils both the critical and rational pretexts. ‘Citizens commenting on issues’, while portraying a high level of deliberation, is largely rational but not overtly critical, while ‘citizens engaging emotionally’ is certainly critical but not rational. The two lowest levels of deliberation, including the most frequently occurring ‘citizens responding individually’ are neither critical nor rational.

Therefore, while ‘citizens commenting on issues’, which makes up 27.3% of al-Arabiya’s coverage, displays a higher deliberative level of participation than ‘citizens engaging emotionally’, the former does not necessarily offer a platform for citizens wishing to critique the electoral process; it simply asks them to list the issues and concerns they see as relevant to their districts or the elections. On the other hand, ‘engaging emotionally’ and ‘making proposals’ both communicate a critical disposition, at least partially, towards the government and/or the elections. Accordingly, only two citizen vox-pops in al-Arabiya’s coverage portrayed citizens
‘engaging emotionally’ and none were portrayed ‘making proposals, effectively implying that spaces for public critique were limited, even in the form of citizens expressing frustrations and disappointments with the political process and/or past parliamentary performance. Once again, this needs to be contrasted with the CSS poll mentioned above which indicated widespread public dissatisfaction (80.7%) with the performance of MPs in the previous parliamentary cycle.

Two of the three vox-pops coded under ‘citizens commenting on issues’ in al-Arabiya’s coverage related to the role of women in society. Both were male vox-pops (in fact, there were no female vox-pops coded under this mode of participation in al-Arabiya’s coverage) and both portrayed attitudes far from favourable regarding the capacity of women to participate in public life. The two vox-pops are;

“The real problem is that there is no benefit from this process, no financial benefit or other. What have we gained from this representation? If the men were unable to help us, how are the women going to succeed?” Male, al-Arabiya, 19 November 2007.

“Women now have a larger role than men I swear. [Reporter: would you vote for a female candidate to become an MP?]. If I don’t find a male candidate, I might.” Male, al-Arabiya, 19 November 2007.

Both comments above suggest that male MPs are regarded as more capable of parliamentary work, although no reasoning is provided. The opinion is simply stated, and as no counter-arguments were provided, they remained uncontested in the coverage. The absence of women in this mode of participation as well as the absence of counter-arguments on gender issues in the coverage raises questions about the inclusivity of al-Arabiya’s coverage, particularly its portrayal of citizens in the news. The example also reveals a loose commitment to deliberation, which allows opinions to be subjected to reason, and this further undermines the channel’s capacity to act as a public sphere.

In addition, al-Arabiya (alongside al-Jazeera) did not feature citizens prominently in its coverage indicating limited spaces for publicness across the regional broadcasters. This limited space afforded the public was reinforced by the absence of any citizen vox-pops in the coverage after election day, indicating that no role beyond the act of voting is ascribed the public.
Fandy (2007) maintains that the region’s two most popular broadcasters, al-Jazeera and al-Arabiya, can be seen to represent the two main alliance-camps in the region; the first made up of Qatar, Syria and Iran, and the second made up of Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Egypt. He adds that whilst Qatar bankrolls al-Jazeera, the launch of the Saudi owned al-Arabiya in 2004 attracted shareholders from the governments of Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Kuwait and Bahrain (*ibid.* 54). Citing the example of the July 2006 Israeli-Lebanese war, Fandy argues that “Arabs were watching two different versions of the war...and reading two different scripts about winners and losers” (2007: 60). Similarly, Pintak alludes to how ownership of transnational media in the region manifests in control over what is covered and what is not; he notes that Qatari foreign policy, especially the growing Israeli-Qatari relationship, is a non-coverable news story for al-Jazeera personnel, in the same manner that al-Arabiya journalists and producers do not approach anything related to terrorism, religion or religious politics (2008: 22). It is within this context that Jordanian-Saudi relations need to be understood.

The Jordanian state has actively pursued the preservation of its relationship with Saudi Arabia. Although initially antagonistic states (as Chapter II outlined), Saudi Arabia has become a generous aid provider and a political ally after the first Gulf War. The preservation of this relationship has sometimes come at the expense of media freedom; in April 2007 the Jordanian authorities confiscated an interview tape from an al-Jazeera anchor in Amman that allegedly contained remarks by Jordan’s Prince Hassan that could be interpreted to offend a member of the Saudi royal family. The Jordanian government risked a possible backlash against its action in order to protect Saudi interests and preserve its relationship with the Saudi royals. The only ‘explanation’ provided was a brief paragraph in the government-owned *al-Rai* the next morning claiming that the confiscation of the interview tape was meant to prevent its “political employment as part of the spear campaign by al-Jazeera against Jordan or to offend brotherly Arab countries” (*www.alrai.com* 22/4/2007 – *my translation*).

Whether or not al-Arabiya’s ownership and the strategic relationship between the Jordanian and Saudi states affected the spaces afforded public participation cannot be established, but are worth contemplating. An alternative explanation may reside in similar attitudes towards democracy on the part of JTV and al-Arabiya which conceive of the public role as limited and largely observatory in nature. It remains true, however, that the channel allowed Jordanian citizens limited spaces to engage, especially when such engagement attempted to
communicate critical dispositions towards the elections or the Jordanian government through ‘making proposals’ or ‘engaging emotionally’.

**al-Jazeera**

Of the four transnational networks, al-Jazeera was the least likely to engage with Jordanian citizens in its coverage, and when it did so, the modes of engagement portrayed were of lower deliberative levels in comparison to the rest of the channels. The box-plot above (Figure VI.d) demonstrates that the majority of al-Jazeera’s vox-pops (those within the 25th and 75th percentiles) were limited to the second and third levels of deliberation – ‘citizens responding individually’ and ‘citizens engaging emotionally’ – with the median clearly skewed towards the former.

This reluctance on behalf of al-Jazeera to engage with citizens in its coverage of a local, national election, limiting both their presence and access to the channel, further lends to arguments disputing the channel’s role as a regional public sphere, at least in normative terms. One explanation may be al-Jazeera’s reputed tendency to present fundamentally opposing perspectives rather than engage with public opinion; el-Nawawy and Iskandar, for example, have argued that,

“...in attempting to represent diverse opinions al-Jazeera often relies on radically antagonistic perspectives more so than moderate ones...Although al-Jazeera’s management argues convincingly for their programming formula, a middle ground needs to be established that reflects the Arab majority – whether their views are described as “nonextremist”, “secular” or something else.” (2002: 200).

Another explanation can be found, again, in Mamoun Fandy’s (2007) structural review of the station’s bank-rollers (the Qatari state) and its management (which he describes as the “new alliance in the Middle East” between the Muslim Brotherhood and the Arab nationalists) (2007: 130). In this light, the marginalisation of public voices in al-Jazeera’s coverage can be attributed to the role the channel perceives the public as playing in its coverage. To elaborate, while the region’s two most dominant political ideologies, political Islam and Arab nationalism, rely on public mobilization around a cause (or often, a leader), the notion of public engagement
through reason and deliberation is only relevant to theories of the public sphere within the
discursive tradition, a perspective which, to Fandy, is “blacklisted” on al-Jazeera. The author
describes an

“extensive blacklist that al-Jazeera has developed of Arab liberals or independent
thinkers who do not bear allegiance to either Islamist or Arab nationalist causes and
who do not toe the official Qatari line.” (ibid. 47).

This argument can be further developed with reference to critiques of the channel’s
sensationalism (Zayani 2005a, Zayani 2005b). In fact, al-Jazeera’s ‘emotionally charged’ content
is often illustrated by reference to the channel’s tendency to feature deeply upset and affected
Arab citizens from the region’s conflict zones, particularly Palestinians and Iraqis. It has been
argued that such content works towards delaying political reform in the region by diverting
attention from national issues outwards (ibid.). While it is unclear how empirically viable these
arguments are (they remain discursive observations), they also mean that even when the public
is present in regional news stories, they are portrayed largely as victims or eyewitnesses. This
further attests to the limited space, and access, afforded the public in the channel’s coverage in
their role as deliberative citizens.

It must be noted that al-Jazeera’s coverage did include a vox-pop in which a Jordanian
citizen was portrayed criticising the current controversial election law and outlining what a
“new, modern law” should address. While this was the only citizen vox-pop to address this issue
across all channels, it remains statistically insignificant (an outlier value as Figure VI.d
demonstrates). This single vox-pop provides little evidence to al-Jazeera’s presumed
‘groundbreaking’ capacity in the region. Al-Jazeera was also the only broadcaster not to portray
any Jordanian citizens at all commenting on issues, including identifying economic or social
problems for parliament to address. In addition, understood within the wider literature on the
channel’s performance, the roles ascribed Arab publics in its coverage, as victims and eye-
witnesses rather than empowered citizens, undermine al-Jazeera’s capacity to facilitate a
transnational public sphere of rational-critical deliberation.
The results of this study suggest that al-Hurra engaged Jordanian citizens more deliberatively in its coverage of the elections than any of the other channels, allowing them greater leverage in defining the issues of public concern. The crosstabulation in Appendix I reveals that the channel was the least likely to portray citizens ‘responding individually’ and the most likely to portray citizens ‘engaging emotionally’. Within its coverage, it portrayed citizens ‘commenting on issues’ much more frequently than the rest of the channels.

It is interesting to consider that al-Hurra was the only network among those monitored in the data sample to broadcast citizen vox-pops expressing salafist ideological orientations. The salafi movement is largely associated with a strict, and at times punitive, reading of the Qur’an. They maintain that the early years of the Islamic faith must be considered the benchmark according to which all social norms, and by extension political legislation, needs to be developed. Hence, they reject democracy as well as the idea of representation as Western ‘infiltrations’ and argue that ‘divine’ laws (developed from their interpretation of scripture) are infallible and therefore superior to any legislation drafted by man. Whilst no official numbers are published as to the number of Jordanians who associate themselves with salafi religious ideas, it is largely recognised to be small and mostly limited to the conservative southern governorate of Ma’an. Indeed, the majority of Jordanians, while conservative, associate more readily with Sunni Islam and its more ‘flexible’ interpretation of Islamic scripture. During its golden age, Islamic philosophers such as Ibn Rushd, known in the West as Averroes, gauged questions on the value of a separation between religion and state; these questions went on to inform emergent debates on secularism westward.

Al-Hurra’s citizen vox-pops which advocated salafist ideas were part of a news story on the preparations for the elections in Ma’an; they include instances in which citizens argued that participation in the parliamentary elections was “un-Islamic” because “Allah is the only legislator” and that such practices were “morally corrupting”. They proclaimed their adherence to the “true Islam” which prohibits giving people as much power as the divine in drafting laws and regulations on how we must lead our lives. An example from a citizen vox-pop portraying this view is:
“Legislation after the arrival of our Prophet Muhammad came to us directly from God, legislation from God, it descended from the heavens to our Prophet Muhammad, and so he legislated. Now legislation is subjective and it is legislation from humans and humans err.” Male, al-Hurra, 18 November 2007.

Al-Hurra’s editorial decision in this regard can be read and interpreted differently. The first explanation is that the channel is indeed advocating political plurality and giving voice to as wide a range of opinions as possible. The second reading, however, takes into consideration the close relationship between the Jordanian state and the American administration (Jordan is one of the US’s closest regional allies and its third largest donor receiver worldwide). Yet, Jordanian citizens retain profoundly negative perceptions of the US-lead occupation of Iraq. Accordingly, this second reading perceives the inclusion of the salafi voices (marginal in Jordan both in terms of number and popularity) as a scripted story with a pre-determined purpose: portraying the threat of ‘Islamic’ fundamentalism as closer to home.

Indeed the sample in not large enough, nor representative enough, to make broad claims about al-Hurra’s intentions or political leanings. Al-Hurra’s portrayal of Jordanian citizens in more deliberative roles needs to be commended, especially in comparison to the representation of citizens in the coverage of al-Arabiya and al-Jazeera. However, questions must still be raised about the purpose of such portrayal within the regional political context, specifically, the ‘battle for the hearts and minds’ of Arab citizens that the US administration has publicly acknowledged pursuing. Perhaps in this light we can conclude that al-Hurra’s US sponsorship raises two main possibilities. The first explanation is that the channel is actively realizing its potential and using the medium of transnational news to allow Jordanian citizens a greater say in political decision making, thereby expanding the scope of freedom of expression in the region in accordance with values of freedom and democracy. As such, the channel would be emulating the role of Voice of America in Eastern Europe. The second more sceptical explanation, however, is that al-Hurra’s coverage sought to present the Jordanian elections as a success story, especially in light of President Bush’s declared ambitions (at the time of the elections) to “spread” democracy in the Middle East. By portraying citizens as actively engaged participants in their affairs (as one would expect to see in a healthy democracy) it could be argued that al-Hurra’s coverage afforded the elections a sense of democratic legitimacy, and the implied cause would be American ‘influence’.
The gendering of the mediated public sphere

Initial results, discussed earlier, found that female citizens were afforded considerably less presence in the news coverage of the Jordanian parliamentary elections in comparison to male citizens. In addition, results also indicated that the ‘access’ granted citizens in the coverage, in terms of their portrayed roles and modes of participation, favoured lower levels of engagement (observation and commentary at the expense of policy-oriented deliberation). It is relevant to therefore ask how this access varied across gender; in other words, how were both genders portrayed along the Continuum of Participation?

Results reveal that equal numbers of male and female vox-pops occupied both ends of the continuum, meaning that both genders were as likely to ‘repeat official narrative’ and to ‘make proposals’. However, within the outermost ends of the continuum, male vox-pops displayed higher levels of deliberation than female vox-pops, as Figure VI.f below illustrates.

Figure VI.f: Box-plot; gender & levels of deliberation

[Figure produced from data using SPSS]

1 LD: levels of deliberation
[Explanation of the figure: the beige boxes in the box-plot represent the values between the 25th and 75th percentiles, whilst the whiskers (on both sides of the boxes) connect the smallest and largest values that lie outside the 25th-75th percentiles but are not statistically outlier values. Outlier values are represented as (°) degree signs, and in this case the single outlier value is the only vox-pop aired portraying a female citizen ‘making proposals’. The levels of deliberation across the vertical axis correspond to those in the Continuum of Participation (illustrated in Figure III.a). The horizontal black lines inside the boxes represent the median, and its location in the box represents skewness. In this case the median in both groups is skewed in favour of lower levels of deliberation, particularly the prevalence of portrayal of citizens ‘responding as individuals’.

The box-plot clearly demonstrates that male citizens were portrayed engaging with more deliberative modes of participation than female citizens; so while the latter were largely portrayed ‘responding individually’, male citizens were much more likely to be represented as ‘commenting on issues’ of public concern. As mentioned earlier, only five vox-pops across the coverage of the four channels portrayed women ‘commenting on issues’, three of them were aired on al-Hurra on 16 November 2007 as part of a news item particularly looking at gender participation in the elections, and the remaining two on JTV on 6 November 2007 and 7 November 2007. The three al-Hurra vox-pops, and the JTV vox-pop aired on 6 November, all covered gender politics specifically;

“We ask our women to stand by their sisters the candidates, because if men saw that women are not standing by each other and supporting each other this will lead them to
rethink their support for female candidates. Women now represent half of the population, she has her role and her word, and her word can be influential in all aspects and on all social groups.” Female, JTV, 9 November 2007.

Al-Jazeera and al-Arabiya did not air any vox-pops at all showing female citizens ‘commenting on issues’, and while al-Arabiya did dedicate one news item to gender issues, the only citizen voices included in the news story were male, and neither portrayed attitudes favourable to egalitarian values. The only female vox-pop coded under ‘citizens commenting on issues’ which did not specifically address gender issues was,

“Honestly, Ma’an needs a lot of support, especially in terms of investment, childcare, gender issues, poverty and unemployment. We hope our MP will represent the entire nation, by legislating laws and serving us.” Female, JTV, 17 November 2007.

Therefore, when invited to comment on issues, female citizens are portrayed as capable of speaking more or less exclusively about gender issues, while male citizens are represented voicing concerns and policy issues deemed ‘public’, whether economic, political or social. Thus, men are portrayed as legitimate speakers on behalf of the entire nation, and implicitly this also presents them as more capable of representing the entire nation, while females are portrayed as speaking on behalf of (and therefore only capable of representing) themselves. Taken together with findings noted earlier (female citizens were more likely to be portrayed as ‘observers’ than their male counterparts, whilst male citizens were more likely to be portrayed ‘commenting on issues’ than their female counterparts) the news coverage of the Jordanian elections is found to reinforce patriarchal understandings of gender roles in society.

Why are women expressing themselves less deliberatively than men on the transnational media? Is it because the very language of rational-critical deliberation can act as a form of exclusion, as Jane Mansbridge (21/3/1990), among others, has argued? Yet, this does not explain why Jordanian women also seemed reluctant to express their desires and feelings even if such participation was emotional and non-deliberative. In turn, is this cultural inequality of sorts representative of Jordanian society, or is it a product of the mediated nature of satellite networks, including the processes of selection and editing that precede a vox-pop being aired?
It is largely recognised that women have been enjoying increasing visibility as reporters and anchors across the region’s transnational networks. Even the Hezbollah run al-Manar features a female anchor in its evening news bulletins, and female reporters during the Iraq war and the most recent Lebanese-Israeli conflict were commonplace. Many female journalists, such as Khadija Bin Qinnah and Kawthar al-Bashrawi, are widely popular and well respected across the region. Sakr notes that when Hezbollah’s leader Hassan Nasrallah granted his first post-ceasefire interview to Maryam al-Bassam the choice was not regarded as extraordinary given how commonplace female political correspondents have become (2007: 98). Perhaps more surprising was the fact that al-Bassam worked for NewTV and not Hezbollah’s al-Manar (ibid.).

According to a female news producer, interviewed by Naomi Sakr, the increased presence of women in television institutions might result in more stories being handled from a female perspective; however, Sakr is quick to point out that “this was not the same as saying it would produce an increase in coverage of so-called women’s issues” (ibid. 99). Sakr also reveals that female journalists and producers actively shy away from such stories for fear of being ‘typecast’ (ibid.). However, the portrayal of female citizens in the news coverage of this case study does not support the argument of the news producer, and reveals that the “female perspective” was not only absent but actually marginalised in comparison to the portrayal of male citizens, both in terms of presence and access.

Furthermore, this representation of Jordanian women in the election coverage needs to be understood within the context of women’s changing political roles in wider Jordanian society. On the surface, such exclusions seem similar to those that marked Habermas’s bourgeois public sphere, but there are significant differences. For one, from a legal standpoint, over the last decade the successive Jordanian governments have spearheaded initiatives geared towards encouraging female participation in public life. The most recent of these schemes was the allocation of a minimum of six parliament seats for female candidates, a law commonly referred to as ‘the quota’ (discussed in Chapter V). Female candidates in Jordan are therefore afforded an advantage over their male counterparts; for whilst ‘the quota’ seats make it possible to have an all female parliament (although that remains a very farfetched possibility), the seats allocated to women make it impossible to have an all male parliament.
This shows a willingness on behalf of the Jordanian state to, firstly, recognise inequality of access and secondly, to address it. Yet, the findings from this study show that inequalities persist even after formal legal barriers have been removed. Indeed, it could be argued that efforts at countering ‘inequality’ have stemmed out of a desire to ‘placate’ human rights organisations in order to buttress Jordan’s image in the West (as a progressive and Western-leaning state). This has meant that they have not stemmed out of, or even been matched by, cultural and social programmes to promote egalitarian values. Furthermore, women are perceived as pawns in a chess game; by improving women’s legal image, attention has been directed away from other issues which also lead to social and political stratification. In fact, the very assignment of ‘quota’ seats for women should be critically considered in relation to the findings of this case study; are female-only seat allocations culpable for news reporting that elicits the views of women on female issues only while continuing to portray the wider role of parliamentary representation as inherently masculine?

It could be argued that the government’s ‘equality’ drive has alienated many within Jordanian society, without bringing much tangible change to the everyday lives of Jordanian women beyond ‘seeing’ more female parliamentarians, an institution deemed powerless to begin with. At the same time, Jordanian women remain underrepresented in the work force, unable to divorce their husbands, in the case of suing for divorce they lose maternal rights to their children in addition to any financial obligations by the father, they still cannot pass on citizenship to their children, and domestic violence is reported to be rampant; one empirical study found that 87% of women in al-Balka governorate reported intimate-partner violence, 47.5% in the form of emotional abuse (shouting and insults), 19.6% of women reported being the victims of physical violence and 12.3% reported ‘neglect’ (al-Nsour, Khawaja and al-Kayyali 2009: 571). The study also found that a third of respondents (all female) accepted domestic violence as a means of ‘disciplining women’ (ibid.).

According to Lister (2007), inclusive citizenship is now about symbolic recognition as much as it is about access to formal rights (2007: 51). She quotes John Hoffman’s description of citizenship as a ‘momentum concept’ that must be continuously reworked in order to realize more of its anti-hierarchal potential, making it a valuable tool for marginalised groups struggling for social justice (ibid. 49). Therefore, while Jordanian female citizens are granted the same legal rights as their male counterparts, their portrayal in the coverage of the elections, both in
terms of presence and access, reveals less ‘symbolic recognition’. It also reveals a failure, on behalf of transnational media, to realize the ‘anti-hierarchical’ potential of citizenship.

Thus, empowerment initiatives to counter the underrepresentation of women in public life have not translated into more empowered forms of representation or participation in transnational public spheres. The unfortunate conclusion is that, more often than not, transnational news media portray women as less deliberative than men, and as more likely to respond than to debate, and less capable of speaking on behalf of the public as a whole. This suggests that, while bypassing national boundaries, transnational media have not been successful in bypassing culturally imposed roles for women in what remain largely patriarchal Arab societies.

Conclusion

The relationship between television and the public sphere has received much academic interest. This case study has sought to examine the publicness of transnational broadcasters in the Arab world long assumed to be sites for the ‘creation’ of a ‘nascent’ Arabic public sphere. In order to do so, this first case study investigated the roles attributed citizens in the news coverage of the Jordanian parliamentary elections of November 2007 across four regional broadcasters: the government run JTV, the widely popular al-Jazeera and its main rival al-Arabiya, and the US sponsored al-Hurra. As Chapter III has outlined, the research hoped to explore empirically the portrayal of citizens in the news coverage of a domestic parliamentary election. It did so by monitoring the election coverage of the November 2007 Jordanian parliamentary elections over a month, starting two weeks before voting day and ending two weeks after that. Citizen presence in the coverage, through vox-pops, was then transcribed, and several different modes of participation were identified in the data. These ranged from limited portrayals of participation, pertaining to ‘repeating official narrative’ and ‘observing and commenting on electoral procedures’ to more deliberative modes that allowed citizens to describe issues of public concern and partake in policy discussion. These different modes of participation were developed into a Continuum of Participation marked at its highest end with modes of engagement that most closely resembled the Habermasean ideal of critical-rational deliberation. SPSS was used to illustrate representation trends that emerged after the process of content analysis coding.
Four trends emerged from the data and were discussed in this chapter. Firstly, citizens were only afforded limited presence in the news, appearing sporadically and inconsistently in the coverage (with the exception of JTV). Secondly, citizens were largely presented as observers of the electoral process, commenting on its proceedings from afar rather than engaging in more deliberative modes of participation. Thirdly, citizens were shown to have a limited role in the news coverage of the elections, a role that ‘ended’ with the act of voting and was not extended to include participation in debates over policy issues that were addressed in the aftermath of the elections. And finally, the mediated public sphere was found to be gendered. Female citizens were afforded less presence than male citizens and in addition, when portrayed, they were represented as less deliberative and more disengaged than male citizens, more likely to share their individual observations on electoral campaigns (for example) than to discuss policy issues. When female citizens were portrayed commenting on issues, their participation was almost exclusively limited to discussing gender politics, while issues deemed public in the wider sense (unemployment, poverty and health to name a few) were left to the men to identify and discuss. In that sense, men are still portrayed as the bearers of the public and the ‘legitimate’ speakers on its behalf.

The implication of the findings is that the transnational Arabic public sphere of news broadcasting, when empirically examined, shows a tendency towards closure and affords citizens limited spaces to deliberate on issues of public concern. Transnational Arabic public spheres, when empirically examined, are apparent rather than real, and portray citizens as peripheral observers rather than public deliberators.

These findings reinforce the arguments advanced by the ‘structural sceptics’ outlined in the previous chapter. The transnational media falls short of the criteria of autonomy and agency discussed in Chapter I which offer a framework for understanding the functioning of mediated public spheres. Both criteria have been raised and discussed in relation to transnational Arabic public spheres by Fandy (2007), who considered the issue of autonomy at length, and Zayani (2008 and 2005a) who argued that transnational media in the Arab world lack the capacity to affect or influence public policy, raising questions about the agency of the Arabic public sphere. This case study identifies a third criterion which thus far has not been addressed: the exclusions that mark the mediated Arabic public sphere of transnational news networks. Questions of inclusion and access are necessary if we are to identify whose views are being represented (as well as whose views are neglected) and, as follows, who speaks on behalf of ‘the
public’. This case study demonstrated that the mediated public sphere was gendered (as a single form of exclusion) but recognition of the criterion of access must be expanded to account for issues of class, ethnicity and religion. If the normative conceptualisation of the public sphere can only be realised through consensus based public opinion that seeks to influence public policy, then the process of formation of that consensus as ‘public opinion’ (or in the case of the Arab world ‘public argument’ as was discussed in Chapter I) should be critically interpreted with regards to who identified the ‘issues’ and then defined this ‘consensus’ as well as whose interests this formation serves.

Finally, in a divergence from the conclusions of the structural sceptics, it must not be missed that ‘citizens commenting on issues’ was the second most frequently portrayed mode of participation in the coverage. While not embodying normative public sphere deliberation, this mode of participation demonstrates a readiness by Jordanian citizens to identify issues deemed public, a process that one can assume is meant to foster influence in terms of setting the coming government’s agenda. This perception of agency by citizens, and the communicative potential of transnational media in portraying such attitudes, point to the possibilities of a strong transnational public sphere, even if this remains unrealised. However, it must also not be missed that discussions of transnational Arabic public spheres should consider how socioeconomic inequalities are sustained in the process of mediation. The exclusions that mark the transnational public sphere, as this case study has revealed, necessitate a consideration of the criterion of access alongside the two criteria of autonomy and agency which have received considerable debate.

This conclusion emerges from an understanding of Arabic public spheres as multiple and not confined to transnational news media. The transnational public sphere of news networks specifically, and transnational media more generally, mediate ‘images’ of publicness. The process of mediation can be weak (as this case study concludes it is) or it can be strong (a possibility yet to be realised), but ultimately the transnational Arabic news media are not conceived as constituting the public sphere in its entirety. The transnational public sphere is seen, at any point in time, as existing alongside myriad public spheres, whether subaltern, occasional or everyday. How this process of mediation changes and how it is affected by publicness in the everyday, occasional and subaltern public spheres remains the wider question to be addressed. Empirical studies, of the kind attempted here, provide much needed snapshots of the process of mediation at a single point in time. More empirical studies will
allow us to examine how this role of mediation changes temporally, and perhaps will enable us to identify how and when manifestations of ‘publicness’ become forms of ‘agency’.
Chapter VII: Historical Relevance of Interactive Theatre as a Medium of the Cultural Public Sphere

It has been argued that the practice of criticism was literary before it became political (Eagleton 1984 cited in McGuigan 2005: 430). Habermas’s *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* described an 18th century literary public sphere – which he traced in private letters and discussions of the arts - that offered spaces for deeper reflection than the political public sphere. Jim McGuigan has termed its modern day equivalent a cultural public sphere and has argued that this aesthetic and affective space is more likely to facilitate keen popular engagement that addresses the immediacy of lifeworld concerns (2005: 435). In the context of the Arab world, Chapter I noted that the guise of fiction often allows Arabic literature to contest dominant ideologies, political and social, whilst avoiding the implications such participation would incur in the political sphere. Yet such rich spaces for discursive contestation in the region remain severely understudied as was outlined in the Introduction.

This [second] case study thus aims to explore the manifestation of such cultural spaces in the region, particularly Jordan, and to identify forms of ‘public sphering’ where social and cultural norms are negotiated and contested in such a manner as to influence and inform what is deemed ‘political’. As such it hopes to complement the first case study of the transnational – and political – public sphere of Arabic language news media. The medium considered in this case study is that of interactive theatre, a participatory form of drama that is historically relevant to the Arab world and which allows for affective and embodied experiences by audience members. The value of performance, as I hope to demonstrate, lies in its capacity to encourage audience members, as citizens, to negotiate processes of social agency and change. The interactive performances studied all revolve around the Jordanian parliamentary elections of November 2007, therefore allowing for a comparative perspective. In total, twenty seven interactive performances were video-recorded for the case study, and all were produced and performed by the Performing Arts Centre (PAC) of the King Hussein Foundation in Jordan. PAC, recently renamed the National Centre for Culture and Arts, was founded in 1987 and focuses on using art in its various disciplines to promote greater development across Jordan’s communities, especially with regards to education and social issues.
The interactive theatre performance studied, *It’s My Right* and *Elections Round the Corner*, as described in Chapter IV, were especially developed to illicit audience responses in the form of discussion and engagement in the first part, and role-playing as citizens in a town hall meeting in the second. Their participation in the performances was then transcribed and thematically grouped and a *Continuum of Engagement* was inductively developed that portrays the diverse ways in which citizens participated and addressed issues of everyday concern. Demographic factors considered also include gender as well as location and ‘apparent’ age group.

To my knowledge, this is the first empirical study of its kind to investigate the use of interactive theatre to understand how Arabic citizens participate in a cultural public sphere. In fact, no study yet has addressed the cultural public sphere as a space that mediates between the artistic/expressive and political/rational in the context of Arabic societies. This chapter will begin by tracing the origins of drama in the Arab world and portraying how, in opposition to European theatrical conventions, Arabic drama has remained a participatory and community-oriented medium. The persistence of folk-tale and storytelling traditions survive alongside the ‘carnivalesque’; along the border between the satirical and the critical, Arabic drama continues to feature, as it has for centuries, fool-wise characters and their experiences of injustice and at times, outright tyranny. Indeed, the relationship between participation and performance has long been acknowledged beyond the Arab world:

“Theatre and democracy were born together; both represent a sociality and a mode of appearing in public which is beneficial to the construction of community; performance itself, as an embodied practice, embeds the abstractions of democratic representation in a participatory constellation of activities...and finally, performance studies reasserts these connections by giving voice to the underrepresented, advocating for an antielitist culture, and restoring the body’s performance to its place alongside the text in academic practice.” (Ridout 2008: 15).

As such, this chapter is an extensive literary introduction to the results and findings of the empirical case study, which is provided in the next chapter.
Drama in the Arab world

The early elements of an Arabic populist theatrical art manifested in the forms of the *Hakawāti* [from the Arabic word *hikāyā* meaning tale; the teller of tales] and the *Rāwī* [literally: relater]. For centuries, these nomadic storytellers would travel across the Arab lands and share their tales – some popular fables, others based on actual happenings and events. Their forms of presentation were plentiful: from dramatised prose to melodic poetry, from the eloquent to the satirical. The wandering storytellers served a dual purpose: they both entertained the tribes and/or villagers who hosted them, and informed them of news and developments.

Arguably, Arabic drama and Greek theatre shared the same beginnings, both developing from earlier ceremonies of fertility (Hamdan 2006: 35), rituals that involved wearing masks and costumes and performing in front of alters or in courts. However, while Greek theatre continued to develop two metaphysical theatrical parallels (tragedy and comedy), which would later influence and inform European theatrical traditions, Arabic drama progressed towards an “informal-folk-comic type” that combined three artistic media: “narration (prose), performance (drama) and songs (poetry).” (ibid.43).

These dramatic traditions of Arabia’s storyteller are well documented and still enjoyed today (the first reference to *One Thousand and One [Arabian] Nights* dates back to the 11th century), yet, it is often argued that ‘theatre’ as traditionally defined did not emerge in the Arab world until the mid-19th century (cf. Le Gassick 1972 and al-Hijjaji 1975). Such arguments often posit two lines of reasoning; first, that no large scale theatres and opera houses emerged in the Arab region prior to the 19th century, nor did any European-style amateur and professional performing troupes develop before then. The second argument is that both the pre-Islamic and Islamic periods were marked by an absence in mythology, which prevented the progression and development of Arabic drama akin to Greek theatre. Al-Hijjaji, a propagator of this view, argues that the Tartar conquests, and their subsequent repression of Arabic culture, inadvertently popularised the Hakawāti and his folkloric tales (cited in Hamdan 2006: 36).

To Hamdan, however, the progression of Arabic drama was an abandonment of the “metaphysical aspects” of Greek theatre in which the individual “lacks any power to manoeuvre”, and instead a turn towards
“...the more earthly kind of life that allows for protest against injustice, weakness, evil, folly, and the shortcomings of government, society and man. In this way it leaves a margin for human choice, for optimism, for faith in the victory of good and evil, and for the realization of man’s dream of earthly justice and happiness.” (2006: 35-6).

As such, Arabic drama, from its early development until the 19th century (when European theatrical traditions would pervade) took the street and the marketplace as its theatre, and the stories of its people as its inspiration. It therefore provided drama that was versatile and mobile, breaking down the barrier between audience and actor, and by implication, the barrier between the political and the social, the theatrical and the real.

**Defining elements of Arabic drama**

As has been alluded to, the development of Arabic drama was manifest in a theatre that was informal and largely informed by the region’s rich oral traditions and folkloric tales. Hamdan explains,

“As Pushkin once remarked, drama was born in the village square. The Arabic theatre took on form and substance around semi-theatrical folk genres that served as raw material of drama. Prominent among them...were the life stories of folk heroes and narrated folk traditions that included poetry and prose collections, myths, monologues, dialogues and anecdotes. Oral folk creations were, throughout Arab history, the main means of popular communication for transmitting ideas and the realization of popular moral victory.” (Hamdan 2006: 42)

Among the ‘life stories of folk heroes’ - which Hamdan refers to as *al-Siar al-Sha’biyya* (literally: popular life-stories) - were numerous representations of the ‘fool-wise’ character in a witty narrative that combines humour with satire and simultaneously offers a critique of the social-political climate of the time; many of these characters survive in popular culture today; to name just a few: Juha, Abu al-Nawwas, Umar al-Khattaf and Shayboub (Khurshid 1991: 134). Another manifestation of the informal-folklore-comedic element in Arabic drama manifested in the development of popular Arabic farce (akin to the Italian commedia dell’arte according to Edward Lane), which also relied on the life experiences of the society’s poor and deprived.
These satirical performances developed in distant villages and only later became established in city centres and coffee shops (Hamdan 2006: 44-45).

By the end of the 11th century, several theatrical terms were already widely used in the Arab world to describe drama texts, indicating the art’s established grounding in Arabic popular culture; for example, Hamdan (2006) mentions the Khayal (fiction), Muhawara and Munazara (dialogue confrontation) and Qissa (story) in addition to the already widely popular Al-Hikaya (tale), Khayal al-Zill (shadow play) and al-Maqama (a short rhetorical narrative dealing primarily with the issue of class in society and overcoming it) (2006: 42). The first reference to 1001 Nights is also found from this era. By the 12th century, performances of 1001 Nights were widely dramatized and performed. French adventurer Vivant Denon, in a description of an evening performance of one of the book’s many tales in 18th century Egypt, contemplates the difference between ‘theatre’ as he knows it, and between the ‘Arab’s’ theatrical entertainment,

“…and thus it happens that the same story is told by several relators successively with equal interest and success; one giving in a better style of declamation that pathetic and amorous part; another throwing in more interest in the battle scenes and those of horror; and a third humouring the laughable events; in short, it is their theatrical entertainment; and as we go to a play the first time for the piece, and afterwards for particular actors, so with the Arabs these repeated representations do not fatigue the auditors.” (1803: 25).

Denon’s ‘relators’ would have each dramatized different characters within the story, merging storytelling with performance and sung poetry (Khurshid 1991: 110). Thus, the ‘theatrical’ in the Arab world assumed a different form; instead of attempting to ‘awe’ with elaborately designed sets and costumes and well performed pieces, the hakawāti and the rāwī had to arouse and excite with their skill in narration.

In addition, Arabic drama, perhaps because of the absence of a structural theatre in which performances were held, developed a more participatory tradition that rejected a separation between the actors and the audience. In his observations, Denon continues to describe post-performance discussions between the audience and the storytellers, in which the audience provide feedback and input, “These tales are followed with discussions; the parts
which have excited applause are criticised, and thus the talents of the performers are brought to greater perfection.” (Denon 1803: 25).

Another -more participatory- example is the dramatic text Muhakamat al-Khulafa (Trial of the Caliphs) written by Ibn ‘Abd Rabbihi in the 10th century. The play featured a Sufi sheikh pretending to be a fool, who would on certain dates ride to the top of the mountain to call on the Caliphs to face trial. With each Caliph called upon, a member of the audience would be brought to stand in his place, until the righteous are sent to heaven and the evil ones to hell (Moreh 1992: 91-2). The significance of this text is not only that it reveals the participatory nature of Arabic drama, but also its commitment to revealing injustice and rejecting the tyranny of the state.

A similar participatory tradition extends to Arabic music; in Virginia Danielson’s study of legendary Egyptian singer Umm Kulthūm, the author points out that music appreciation is largely participatory, with silence, even during a performance, being considered a sign of displeasure:

“... audience members call out subtle compliments or loud encouragement to performers... Performances are ultimately shaped by repetitions encouraged by audience requests.” (1997: 9).

As such, Umm Kulthūm continuously ‘shaped and re-shaped’ renditions of her songs to create ‘with and for the audience’ performances that were sensitive to the mood of the particular audience, and to the emotions evoked by the poem she was singing (ibid. 155). Danielson argues that Umm Kulthūm’s creative renditions had historical resonance; she cites a story from Kitāb al-Aghānī (literally: Book of Songs, compiled by al-Iṣbahānī in the 10th century) that revolves around a debate, between father and son, on two singers of very different musical styles; the first, Ālīyah, is ‘more knowledgeable’ and ‘performs and composes with artful mastery’, while the second, Mukhāriq, has ‘masterly control’ over his voice but he ‘does not perform even one song as he learned it’ and ‘does not sing it twice the same way’. The father finally concedes that, despite his personal preference for Ālīyah’s singing style, it is Mukhāriq who would, in a hypothetical competition, win the favour of the assembly because of his ‘abundant ornamentation’ (cited in Danielson 1997: 157-158).
Umm Kulthūm’s varied renditions of her songs thus moved ancient Arabic practices into the 20th century, hence the continuous reference to her music as *asīl* (meaning: authentically Arabic) (*ibid*. 158). I am told my own great-grandfather used to sit down hugging the radio every time an Umm Kulthūm concert was being broadcast live. Perhaps the act of grabbing on to the radio, holding it so tight, compensated for his inability to participate verbally in the concert itself.

**A language of their own**

The mobility of the wandering *Hakawāti*, his plethora of tales and stories from across the Arab world and the participation of audiences in his performances around the region, are bound to have brought together a range of cultural traditions, linguistic dialects and religious practices. As such, the *Hakawāti* was a truly transnational force, yet, that must have also offered a challenge for the nomadic storyteller.

Arguments often outline significant tension in the development of Arabic drama between the ‘proper’ *Fusha* Arabic, and the ‘*Ammiyeh* Arabic (literally: ‘official’ and ‘common’ respectively, the later referring to colloquial dialects that vary significantly from one part of the region to the next). Historically, the Arabic language has been held, by Arabs, with high esteem. Since pre-Islamic times, poets who mastered their language were celebrated; the annual Souk *Ukaz*, which is said to have gone on for over two centuries, saw the greatest orators of their time gather in Mecca to demonstrate their skill and appeal for the crowd’s favour. Several poems, deemed to be of exceptional mastery, where written in pure gold on silk parchment and hung up for all passerby’s to enjoy and marvel. These celebrated poems, known as the *Muʿalakāt*, have survived and they serve as indicators of the cultural value the Arabic language, in its *Fusha* form, enjoyed. It might also explain why the three notable Arab philosophers who translated Aristotle’s the Poetics (al-Farabi, Ibn Sina and Ibn Rushd) “…focused upon the poetic aspects of this material at the expense of its dramatic and thematic aspects” (Hamdan 2006: 33).

This trend was naturally strengthened by *Fusha* acquiring divine recognition as the language of the Qur’ān. Don Rubin notes the Muslim belief that the survival of Islam depends on “…keeping Fusha, in its purest form, alive and intelligible” (1999: 19). He continues to argue
Chapter VII: Historical relevance of interactive theatre

that it is for this purpose that formal instruction in the region attempts to ‘propagate Fusha’ whilst also trying to ‘eradicate’ colloquial Arabic (ibid.). And although he acknowledges that both forms of Arabic have learnt to co-exist, “sharing tasks of communication on a more-or-less complementary basis: written communication in Fusha but oral communication in colloquial” (ibid.20), Rubin maintains that colloquial Arabic never really ‘attained respectability’ although it is the form of language most used by Arabs to express themselves.

Records suggest that the language of the Hakawātis commonly merged the ‘correctness’ of the Fusha with the ‘delicacy’ of the ‘Ammiyeh, approximating a third language where numerous dialects were represented; the urban, the rural and the ethnic (Hamdan 2006: 36). As such,

“...al-Siar al-Sha’biyya could also break the regional [language] barrier and at the same time overcome the rigidity of the literary language and its inability to respond to the new demands made by the constant changes in life, in practical matters and in values.” (Khurshid 1991 cited in Hamdan 2006: 37).

However, whilst the ‘third language’ facilitated the Hakawāti’s travels and dramatizations, the attempts of Arabic playwrights in the 19th and 20th centuries to do the same backfired. Tawfiq al-Hakim, the Arab world’s most celebrated playwright, and Farah Antun would both try to experiment with a ‘third’ language by combining elements of both forms of Arabic in the theatre. Both were widely criticised, and their attempts were unsuccessful. Yacub Sannu, a pioneer of Egyptian theatre who alone translated and produced over 30 plays, would also face considerable controversy for using only colloquial [Egyptian] Arabic in his plays.

The first ‘triumph’ of colloquial Arabic in the theatre came through Ahmad Said’s al-Shab’anīn (1964) which characterized the corrupt and greedy as using Fusha, whilst the poor and hardworking spoke in ‘Ammiyeh:

“It quickly became apparent in the play that the higher and more abstract the Fusha, the greater the character’s corruption... while colloquial Arabic was openly hailed as the tongue of the decent” (Rubin 1999: 23).

It is difficult to gauge why the Hakawāti’s ‘third language’ was celebrated whilst the contemporary playwright’s experiments in this regard were so widely criticised. Hamdan,
building on Moreh’s arguments, posits that although Arabic drama was present, it did not
develop into a ‘high art’, an impediment resulting, he suggests, from the ‘highly complicated’
and ‘regulated’ Arabic poetry, which was considered the ‘backbone’ of Arabic culture (2006: 46).
Thus, whilst the informal linguistic approach of the *Hakawāti* added to his folkloric
performances (one can only assume that the use of several dialects can enhance the comedic
factor), the attempt to ‘formalise’ Arabic drama in the 19th century on par with European
understandings of ‘high art’ meant that it was inevitably compared to Arabic poetry, with the
latter’s linguistic ‘correctness’ imposed as ‘standard’.

**The introduction of the theatre**

By the early nineteenth century, a theatrical tradition approaching that of the West had
started to emerge in the Arab world, with Egypt assuming the role of regional hub (although
more limited theatrical centres did emerge elsewhere in the Arab world). Le Gassick argues that
the adoption of European theatre in Egypt was largely influenced by the encouragement of
Napoleonic and his successive generals for the purpose of entertaining the officers and the troops
(1972: 173). The Danish traveller Carsten Niebuhr described a play he attended in Cairo in the
eighteenth century, performed by a ‘company of players’ (Muslims, Christians and Jews) who,
‘for a moderate hire’, performed their pieces whenever invited, with the ‘court of the house’
being their theatre, and a screen used to change their costumes (1792: 143). G.B. Belzoni also
describes two short plays he attended in Cairo in 1815, and Edward Lane describes similar plays
in the early 19th century dealing with the corruption and the tyranny of officials (cited in Le
Gassick 1972: 172-3).

In 1869 Egypt’s first Opera House was inaugurated, but it continued to present
performances in mainly European languages for several years. It was not until 1847 that Mārūn
al-Naqqāsh directed and performed the first Arabic language play, in the garden of his house in
Beirut, Lebanon. It was said that al-Naqqāsh’s fascination with theatrical productions he
attended in France and Italy inspired him to write the script for *al-Bakhīl* (The Miser) (Kennedy
2003: 70-71). His interest in the theatre inspired several members of his family to take up
careers in the field; his brother and nephew, Nicūlā and Salīm al-Naqqāsh, would later move to
Egypt and begin a theatre company there. Sheikh Rifaa Rafe al-Tahtāwī, a prominent Islamic
scholar, also translated several French plays into the Arabic language upon his return to Egypt
from Paris, and in Syria Sheikh Ahmad Abu Khalil al-Qabbānī began producing Arabic language plays (as well as musical theatre) as early as 1865 (he too would later move to Egypt after harassment from conservative religious authorities in Damascus) (ibid. 71). Together, al-Naqqāsh and al-Qabbānī are recognised as the fathers of modern Arabic theatre.

Following the defeat of 1967, a more politically oriented theatre started to emerge, notably the theatre of al-Shawk (literally: theatre of the thorns) in Syria and the theatre of al-Qahwa (meaning: coffee) in Cairo. These performances were cabaret-like, “real coffee-house theatre” performances, as al-‘Ushri describes them, that did not “present an integrated theatrical presentation...but [were] completely involved in criticism and social incitement” (1987 cited in Hamdan 2006: 59). Like earlier genre’s of Arabic drama, the carnivalesque continued to define such theatrical manifestations, and the actor/audience binary remained vague with the spectators actively engaging, at times physically joining the performers on stage, and suggesting changes or actions to be played out (ibid. 59-60). This carnivalesque quality, to Hamdan, extends through the tragic-comic theatre of Lahham and al-Maghout, two contemporary Arabic dramatists whose theatrical careers expanded successfully into television. Hamdan argues that the progression of Arabic theatre, from its inception, fully develops in Lahham and al-Maghout’s plays to create a theatre he names Carnivalesque Satire. The duo’s foul-wise character, Ghawwar, with eccentricity and through parody, was able to overcome official ‘prohibition’ and present a narrative that, at times, countered the official ideology (ibid. 79-80). As such, he was the peer of Nietzsche and Backtin’s wise but naïve fool who “stand[s] above morality ... laughs and mocks and drives society to renew itself” (ibid. 131).

Drama in Jordan

In its current borders, Jordan was recognized as an independent state in 1946 following the termination of the British Mandate of Transjordan. Yet, throughout history, Jordan has witnessed the rise and fall of numerous civilisations; both indigenous -such as the Nabataean Kingdom of Petra (200 BC) and ‘Ain Ghazal (a Neolithic city that dates back to 7250 BC) – and of conquering forces: the Greek, Roman, Persian and Ottoman Empires, as well as the various Islamic Caliphates.
These enduring histories have left a legacy of architectural, and cultural, richness across the Jordanian landscape, and they bear witness to the various artistic traditions that the country has known. For example, Greco-Roman amphitheatres have survived in the capital Amman, in the Decapolis cities of Jerash and Umm Qais in the north, and in the southern city of Petra. This indicates that the performative had an established presence in Jordanian history, yet, as al-Tal notes, this has also meant that indigenous drama forms may have been compromised:

“Unfortunately, in Jordan, it is not possible to find any details or documents of theatre activities of that time, mainly because all conquerors or invaders (Greeks, Persians, Turks, Romans, etc.) forced the indigenous people to adopt their culture and ensured that whatever local culture existed was destroyed or adopted and adapted as their own.” (1985: 43).

The only two indigenous dramatic arts documented, according to al-Tal, are the travelling storytellers (the Hakawātis) and the traditional shadow-theatre performances. She recounts that the arrival of the Hakawāti was anxiously awaited among the villagers who “treated him with generosity and respect” (ibid. 44). Al-Tal laments that the “… rapid change in our ways of life brought an abrupt end to this breed of men” (ibid.) and their animated performances of folkloric tales.

The second documented traditional dramatic art, shadow-theatre, was popular among the country’s Bedouin tribes. Sawalha (1983) notes that these evening performances consisted of a white sheet, hung in front of the bonfire, and skilled performers in puppet-like clothing conveying simple storylines, with humorous punch-lines, and exaggerated movement and emotion (cited in al-Tal 1985: 44). It is unclear to what extent these shadow-theatre performances resembled the regionally established shadow-puppet theatre (Indonesian in origin but popularised by the Ottomans) which relied largely on puppet-like figures. Although some variations would include live acting (as in the case of the Bedouin performances described by Sawalha), yet, they usually comprised of a puppeteer handling flat-cut figures and providing the speech for the story’s characters. Indeed, the nomadic lifestyle of the Bedouins, reliant upon constant movement, meant that they could only carry with them what was necessary for their survival, and puppet-like figures are unlikely to qualify. Therefore, this suggests that the dramatic art of shadow theatre among Jordan’s Bedouins differed significantly from the regionally established variant. Sadly, there is too little evidence to fully understand the
distinctiveness of this dramatic tradition. For whilst several shadow-play scripts (of the regional variant) have survived, there are no records of the tales performed from behind white sheets at Bedouin bonfires.

An unsteady course: the introduction of theatre

With the start of the twentieth century, Jordanian drama started to adopt the European theatrical traditions that had already taken hold in Egypt. Some of the earliest recorded plays were performed by the students of the Latin School of Madaba and directed by the Arab Catholic priest Antone Heeki. Records show that the religious play *The Fire and the Devil* was first performed in the school in 1909. Along with Father Zakaria al-Shomaly, the two priests would go on to produce Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* in the 1920s (al-Tal 1985: 45 and Ghanma and Omran 1999: 122).

It wasn’t until the 1940s, however, that dramatic community clubs and amateur drama societies started to emerge. Some were local, such as the Cultural Co-operation Club which was the first to present an Arabic play in Jordan (*Suhad* by Mahud Taymour) (Ghanma and Omran 1999: 122) and others were foreign-oriented, such as the Amman Dramatic Society established by the British Army, which “...brought with it full British theatre traditions” (al-Tal 1985: 45). Most of the plays performed, however, revolved around historical or religious events. Recorded examples include *The Conquest of Andalus* (directed by Sheikh F Khatib), *The Hostage* (Mohammed Muheisen) and *The Arabs’ Evening* (Othman Kassem) (Jordan Centre of the International Theatre Institute 2004: [http://www.iti-worldwide.org/](http://www.iti-worldwide.org/)).

There seems to be a consensus, among the few resources available, that 1963 marked the real beginnings of Jordanian theatre. A group of students, all theatre enthusiasts, started staging translated plays on a regular basis. Among their repertoire were Robert Thomas’s *The Trap*, Ibsen’s *Doll’s House* and Oscar Wilde’s *Lady Windermere’s Fan*. The only documented Arabic play they produced was Tawfiq al-Hakīm’s *I Want to Kill* in 1965. In the same year, and with the support of the Ministry of Information, these young theatre enthusiasts formed Jordan’s first professional theatrical group under the leadership of Hani Snober, which they named Usrat al-Masrah al-Urduni (literally: The Jordan Theatre Family). However, evidence suggests that “both public involvement and attendance were minimal” as the western
translated plays failed to capture or engage Jordanian audiences (Ghanma and Omran 1999: 124). Possible exceptions are Steinbeck’s *The Moon is Down* and Sartre’s *No Exit*, both performed after the 1967 six-day war and both capturing the national sense of frustration following the defeat (*ibid.*). Yet, the attraction was short lived and Usrat al-Masrah al-Urduni, whilst widely credited for ‘paving the way’ for Jordanian drama (see al-Tal 1985 and Jordan Centre of the International Theatre Institute 2004), was unfortunately never successful in engaging with local issues. The group closed down in 1971.

A younger generation of Jordanian dramatists, mostly educated in Egypt, took the helm, and they began producing theatre plays, in Arabic, of a more political nature. At Jordan University, young drama enthusiasts Ahmad Qawadri and Hatim as-Sayed started producing and performing theatrical plays on the university’s campus. Hatim as-Sayed, with the support of the Department of Arts and Culture, would go on to produce an Arabic play in 1979 addressing the Arab-Israeli conflict and the survival of the anti-occupation resistance movement (Ghanmwa and Omran 1999: 127). Although audiences remained small, the plays did appeal to a wider public, and successfully engaged local issues and public sentiment.

Private theatre groups started to emerge too. Amoun 74, founded by Suheil Elias, for example, quickly established a presence performing Jordanian plays to an appreciative local audience. Along with Jamil Awad, the two directors would produce an original local production every year. However, the venture didn’t last long and the group closed down in 1978. (*ibid.* 125).

The early 1970s also marked the beginning of children’s theatre in Jordan. A dedicated dramatist, Margo Maltigyan, established the “Friends of the Child Club”, a small centre in Jabal al-Weibdeh and a haven for children with an interest in drama and theatre. In 1970 Maltigyan produced the first professional children’s play, *Anbara and the Witch* and this was followed by twenty other plays in the ensuing decade. A true pioneer, Maltijian’s centre made drama interesting, and accessible, to Jordanian children of all social and economic backgrounds. (My mother, who participated in one of Maltigyan’s productions as a child (*The Woodcutter’s Children* 1972) used to walk half an hour every day to and from the centre for rehearsals. She recalls the experience as one of her fondest childhood memories, and notes that following the production, she had her heart set on becoming an actress. Eventually, she never pursued her dream of acting, but she did make a career for herself in designing theatre costumes.)
In 1978 The Association of Jordanian Theatre Professionals was established, and several milestones followed. In 1982 the Royal Cultural Centre was inaugurated, housing two theatres equipped with the most advanced facilities of the day. In 1983 al-Yarmouk University, in the north of Jordan, established a Fine Arts and Theatre Department. To Ghanma and Omran these developments helped “diminish the foreign nature of theatre activities” in Jordan (1999: 127). The emergence of the Fawanees [meaning: lanterns] theatre group in the early 1980’s was seen to mark a new kind of theatre in Jordan, “one committed to social action and social change” (ibid. 128). Their first production was an adaptation of Brecht’s *Master Puntila and His Man Matti* raising issues related to social and economic class in society. According to the Jordan Centre of the International Theatre Institute, Jordanian theatrical productions in the 1980s were marked by a return to the ‘metaphorical’ in Arabic drama: Arab mythology and popular folktales, as well as the figure of the *Hakawāti*, were once again revived on the theatre (Jordan Centre of the International Theatre Institute 2004: http://www.iti-worldwide.org/).

In 1983 the Jerash International Cultural Festival was launched, and featured foreign performances as well as twelve local plays for children and adults alike. Writing two years later, it is clear al-Tal is elated with optimism:

“[The Jerash International Cultural Festival] event brought together the past three generations of theatre pioneers and enthusiasts in a variety of well-polished productions, which gave the impression that Jordanian Theatre is well on its way to leaving its mark on the cultural life of Jordan.” (1985: 47).

**A return to Arabic roots; the satirical theatre of the everyday**

The early 1990s proved eventful for Jordanians. In 1991, Jordan found itself walking the tightrope during the first Gulf War. In its aftermath, Jordan suffered from the contraction of American financial aid, on which the country is dependent, in the midst of an already severe financial crisis. Yet, the economic constraints also beckoned greater political liberalisation, and with greater freedom of expression emerged a satirical theatre that resembled the once-popular theatre of Arabic farce, including the incorporation of its informal-folkloric-comedic elements.
The socio-economic hardships Jordanians were enduring, coupled with the boycott of Jordan Television dramas by Arab states, sent Jordanians back to the ‘political theatre of the everyday’, eager for an outlet that expressed and examined their current affairs. Hisham Yanis, who would become a household name in Jordanian satirical theatre, noted in an interview, “Then the Gulf War came. Jordan was besieged. There was a harmony to our collective agonizing. Internal reins were loosened. In our fight for survival, satire finally became an accepted weapon” (Fliegel n/a: http://archives.obs-us.com/obs/german/books/mem/toc.htm).

Like its ancestral form, Jordanian satirical theatre would also build on the ‘fool-wise’ character popular in the folktales once performed by the roaming Hakawāti. For example, Nabil al-Mashini, a TV actor who acquired popularity performing the character of Abu Awad in local series, would go on to open his own theatre featuring Abu Awad as the lead character. Several other actors would follow suit, and TV characters such as Sam’a, al-‘Am Ghafel and Marzouq would soon get their own theatres.

The most popular satirical trio are largely recognized to be Nabil Sawalha, Hisham Yanis and Amal Dabbas who performed in the Rainbow Theatre in Jabal Amman. Their witty and at times scathing plays attracted a wide audience, including the late King Hussein (who they spoofed on stage), the Chiefs of Intelligence and various parliamentary figures. Their plays, often noted for making people cry from laughter, would grapple with many contentious issues, including the 1994 peace-treaty with Israel, and no topic seemed off limits. In an interview with al-Jazeera’s presenter Kawthar al-Bishrawi, Amal Dabbas, the female face of the trio, attempted to explain the official tolerance to their biting critiques:

“If we wanted once to critique the Jordanian Prime Minister for example, through a play, we criticise him, but we do not criticize his persona, we criticize his actions...that is why when we critique how he conducts his official duties he understands us, because we did not interfere with his privacies, because they are none of my business. So my role ends with [expressing] the [public] pain.” (al-Jazeera.net 18/10/2002: http://www.aljazeera.net/ – my translation)

However, the effectiveness of expressing ‘public pain’ through satirical theatre has been questioned by those who suggest that, in effect, satirical theatre plays a venting role, a safety
valve through which citizens release their anger and frustration with the political processes. Rather than act as a catalyst for change, satirical theatre is therefore effectually maintaining the status quo. In an answer to a similar claim by al-Jazeera’s presenter, in which she questioned whether satirical theatre is a ‘legitimate son’ of the government or a ‘voice for the opposition’, Nabil Sawalha emphatically stated that he was neither this nor that. Sawalha explained that he saw himself, as a comedic writer, actor and director, as “an observer of life... [and] a facilitator of debate on the negativities in society” (al-Jazeera.net 2/8/2002: http://www.aljazeera.net/ – my translation). And whilst he conceded that ‘venting’ might be a by-product of satirical theatre, he noted that it simultaneously ‘facilitates debate’ (al-Jazeera.net 9/8/2002: http://www.aljazeera.net/ - my translation).

There is probably no simple answer as to whether Jordan’s satirical plays are in fact safety valves that maintain the status quo, or legitimate forms of public political expression. However, some ironies abound. Jordanian theatre performances, unlike media outlets, never have their scripts censored or approved prior to performance. Also unlike mainstream media, there is no record of any actor being arrested or facing trial for what he/she said on stage. The reasons for this ‘preferential treatment’ are unclear. It could be a naivety on part of the government in assuming that multi-media have a capacity to ‘propagate’ ideas that theatres do not. Or it might be the recognition that Jordanian satirical theatre is not as widely accessible as the mainstream media, as all theatres were based in the capital Amman.

Regardless of the causes, the revival of Arabic farce and the popularity of Jordanian satirical theatre created throughout the 1990s and early 21st century an environment that allowed the examination of political realities and political figures, without the ‘baggage’ typically associated with the political public sphere. As such, it can be classified as a cultural public sphere, a versatile medium that serves both the art world and that of politics. Writing in 2007, a commentator in a Jordanian daily described the political significance of this cultural public sphere,

“Seven years ago, for example, at least four political plays were being performed in Amman’s theatres on a daily basis, all committed to common issues and offering direct criticism of the policies of the government of the day and of public figures in Jordan, the region and the world. They resembled political salons and conferences that typically host lengthy discussions on all that is going on in the world, and things are said that are
not usually said in public, sometimes even touching taboos and crossing over red lines.” (Shana’a 6/10/2007: http://www.addustour.com/ - my translation).

Sadly, even the popular satirical theatre was to have an uneven course in Jordanian cultural life. Rainbow Theatre in Jabal Amman is no more, following the split of the popular satirical trio. Omar al-Mashini’s theatre in Jabal al-Weibdeh, where he performed his character Abu Awad, was also reclaimed by the bank following financial difficulties. Jordanian satirical theatre is today a seasonal event, with most productions presented in the lunar month of Ramadan (also the month of the Muslim fast), and usually performed in Amman’s hotels with the iftar (the first meal of the day, eaten at sunset, to break the fast). They retain their popularity, and tickets to most performances need to be booked in advance. However, like the scripted plays still performed in Jordan, neither drama forms have proved sustainable.

Jordanian drama was also incorporated into private school curricula (in the first instance) following the recognition of Theatre in Education (TIE) techniques and methods. Al-Tal, whose master’s thesis (An Examination of the British Model of Theatre in Education and an Evaluation of its Relevance for Jordan) was referred to numerous times in this chapter, returned to Jordan following her graduation from Cardiff in 1985 and established a TIE theatre programme within the Noor al-Hussein Foundation, a Royal NGO committed to establishing socio-economic projects that benefit local communities. She would later become the director of the PAC, the centre that developed and performed the interactive performances constituting this case study. Also, Samar Dudein who studied drama at Santa Clara University launched a series of workshops (I.D.E.A.) introducing TIE activities. By the mid-1990s the importance of drama in education was officially recognised and a national programme was launched that provided training for public school teachers to encourage the incorporation of drama in teaching methods. To Way, practical drama in this sense helps the “natural, organic development of each individual, exploring, discovering and mastering his own resources, and attaining a sensitive, confident relationship with his environment” (1967: 268). As such, TIE seems to share its participatory elements with organic dramatic traditions that survive in the Arab world. The interactive theatre performances that constitute this case study, described in Chapter IV, incorporated both cultural dramatic forms as well as TIE techniques. In so doing, they afforded spaces for public participation, and more crucially, contestation and negotiation of dominant meanings. The next chapter aims to highlight the ways in which this cultural space facilitated debates on issues central to defining the political.
Chapter VIII: Results and analysis: the performative/cultural public sphere

To Habermas, the literary public sphere was a site of genesis; writers, musicians and artists first submitted their ideas within this sphere for feedback, comments and further exploration. The Parisian salons, the primary spaces for the literary public sphere, saw the different classes of society interact together and converse over subjects ranging from politics to theatre with equal fervour, in addition to renditions of personal stories, encounters and travels. The literary public sphere also afforded participants arenas for deeper reflection, and it was thus within its realms, and particularly through the critique of art, that the Church’s monopoly over interpretation was broken. To McGuigan, the literary public sphere survives today as a cultural public sphere, comprising a diverse array of forms including mass mediated entertainment genres like soap operas. Through their portrayals of everyday life and issues of common concern, McGuigan argues that cultural public spheres allow us to explore questions relating to ‘who we are’ and ‘how we live’, and this requires emotive and effective negotiations of meaning.

Incorporating discussions of the literary and cultural public spheres into debates of the public sphere theory, and particularly in this thesis the theory of the Arabic public sphere, gains greater potency with regards to Fraser’s (1990) and Dahlgren’s (1995) arguments; to Fraser, the public sphere must be understood not solely through the prism of deliberation, but rather, as spaces for contestation and renegotiation of dominant narratives of power, which continue to exist in non-egalitarian stratified societies. Marginalised groups are thus able to construct ‘paths to publicness’ (what she terms subaltern counterpublics) that increasingly feed into, and affect, the political. Similarly, Dahlgren has argued that,

“We do not enter the public sphere as fully formed individual citizens; our self conceptions and their collective affinities are perpetual processes which continue to be formed even as we participate within the public sphere itself. Thus the public sphere is also a terrain of socialization and acculturation, a setting of who we are as citizens, and what citizenship itself means to us as part of our identities. Both civil society and the public sphere are in part constituted by the socio cultural interaction of citizens; the social world, in short, derives from collective action and interaction.” (1995: 152).
This thesis, as has been mentioned, hopes to explore such sites of socio-cultural interaction that inform the socialisation of citizens (in turn a political process) within the cultural public spaces of interactive theatre. An account of the performances and the methodological approaches and methods guiding this case study were provided in Chapter IV, and Chapter VII provided a historical account of the relevance of interactive theatre as a medium of socio-cultural interaction in the Arab world given the participatory elements associated with dramatic traditions in the region.

As outlined in Chapter IV, all instances in which audience members participated in the performances, either through discussion and confrontation with the actors, deliberation with fellow audience members, role playing as well as comments, heckles and off-hand remarks were transcribed onto index cards that were colour coded for gender with the location and apparent age group noted. The 27 recorded interactive plays produced 826 ‘participations’ by the audience. As was noted in Chapter IV, the performances were performed in a range of locales, from community centres to sports auditoriums, school theatres and vocational centres or under perched tents on university campuses. The audiences who attended the plays therefore varied significantly from one performance to the other, and sometimes within the same locale; they included the elderly and the very young, Bedouin communities, farming villages and urbanites (working class and middle class as well as one performance in an expensive private school). Similar ways of talking were then grouped together and a Continuum of Engagement (Figure IV.a) was developed to portray the range of ideological values (from the particular to the universal) expressed by audience members in the performances. This allowed a comparative dimension with the first case study of the political mediated public sphere where a Continuum of Participation (Figure III.a) was also developed. Like the first case study, all transcribed participations were then coded into SPSS.

**Modes of engagement in the cultural public sphere**

Initial results revealed that the most frequently expressed mode of engagement was ‘Citizens identifying qualities of legislative MPs and describing democratic voting behaviour’ accounting for over a third (34.3%) of the 826 comments transcribed. The second most frequently expressed mode of engagement was ‘Citizens directly questioning MPs and/or candidates on performance, actions, ideals or beliefs’ (18.8%) followed by ‘Citizens discussing
issues’ (14.4%). The frequency table below outlines the distribution of different modes of participation across the *Continuum of Engagement*;

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Valid participation</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Citizens expressing traditional narratives</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>8.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>citizens expressing a fatalistic attitude</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>6.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>citizens identifying qualities of legislative MPs and describing democratic voting behaviour</td>
<td>283</td>
<td>34.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>citizens directly questioning MPs and/or candidates on performance, actions, ideals or beliefs</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>18.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>citizens expressing frustration with past and current parliamentary performance</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>9.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>citizens discussing issues</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>14.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>citizens negotiating change</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>6.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>citizens expressing universal attitudes</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>826</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table VIII.a: Frequency table; mode of engagement

[Table produced from data using SPSS]

In addition, participation by gender was more or less equal; 48.9% of transcribed comments were female and the remaining 51.1% were male. The crosstabulation in Appendix III
portrays how audience engagement with the modes in the continuum differed across gender; some of the findings below are quoted from that table.

As noted above, the two most frequently engaged modes were ‘Citizens identifying qualities of legislative MPs and describing democratic voting behaviour’ and ‘Citizens directly questioning MPs and/or candidates on performance, actions, ideals or beliefs’. This was true across both genders; 37.4% of females and 31.3% of males were capable of identifying normative ideals in relation to political representation and democratic governance, and 19% of males and 18.6% of females embodied the role of active citizens questioning parliamentary candidates and/or holding their representatives accountable. Together, these findings affirm that Jordanian citizens, both males and females, have an understanding of democratic ideals and are capable of executing democratic and participatory practice. Examples of audience engagement coded under ‘citizens identifying qualities of legislative MPs and describing democratic voting behaviour’ include:

“Sir, we want an MP who is young, an MP that will serve his country and nation, we don’t want a hereditary MP who assumed the position in succession from his father and grandfather before him. Even if he were the simplest of people and from the simplest of families, as long as he serves his community and is educated.” Male, al-Mafraq 18 October 2007.

“When people go to his office [unclear], that he greets the people. And listens to them all, not just to write a memo to his secretary and forget about it.” Female, al-Baka’a 14 November 2007.

Recorded engagement under this mode was often a direct response to questions by the moderator, Muhannad, on the structure of government, the relationship between the legislative and executive branches, and the qualities that identify a person equipped to legislate. The most common responses were characteristic descriptions of the ideal candidate; “honest”, “capable”, “with a history of service to his/her area”, “religious”, “God fearing”, “talks directly to the people”, “someone who feels our pain and lives our reality”. However, these qualities seemed to stem from previous (disappointing) experiences citizens had with their MPs, as the examples above demonstrate.
In addition, ‘Citizens directly questioning MPs and/or candidates on performance, actions, ideals or beliefs’ represented instances when citizens most effectively participated in role-play as citizens of the constituency which the actors (as candidates) were running for. It includes questions voiced to the candidates that directly demanded explanations, clarifications or quizzed their knowledge of the area and their capacity to govern. Some were satirical and intended to discredit the candidates, most were addressed to Abu Ahmad, already an MP running for a third cycle, as citizens attempted to hold him accountable for his weak performance;

“But if a group of us came over to you and asked you to represent our views on a certain policy, but you were not convinced of our position even if it were the majority position, would you, would you?” Male, al-Husun 30 October 2007.

“Abu Ahmad, if you may, I just remembered that we came to you once with names of university students, [economically] poor, so that you can help them with financial aid from trusts created in the country for this purpose. Not one of them received any aid at all ... we gave you a list with around 12 or 13 names....why didn’t you follow up?”. Male, al-Mafraq 18 October 2007.

“I want to ask Abu Ahmad, in the last two cycles, where did you travel?”. Male, Madaba 15 November 2007.

“How much is a vote worth to you Abu Ahmad?” Female, al-Sweileh 18 November 2007.

The above two – satirical – comments were repeated several times by audience members across most governorates. The all-expenses-paid trips MPs frequently take were introduced to enable parliamentarians to visit other countries and learn from the legislative experiences of other nations. The audiences in the interactive plays, however, articulated the widely held belief in the futility of these trips and their more ulterior purposes (the perception of using the money to go on holiday). The comment about vote buying, also repeated frequently in the performances, used satire to discredit the public denials by candidates regarding their widespread use of money to bribe people into voting for them. To elaborate, the audience member phrased her question to mean ‘how much do you pay for a vote’ not ‘do you buy votes?’ implying that she rejects his denial before he even has a chance to articulate it.
It is important to keep in mind that the percentage of audience members who participated from amongst all audiences present is unknown. Public access to these performances was open and free, and most of the performances were held in open-air spaces such as university campuses and community centres where people came and went. Although the majority sat through the whole performance, some joined towards the end of a performance while others attended a part of it and had to run off. It was impossible to get a headcount at performances, and this largely means that whilst participation rates among males and females were almost equal, the findings do not tell us anything about those who did not participate. Yet, the ways in which audience members who did choose to participate did so remains very telling in itself.

Overall, initial findings reveal an optimistic picture about how Jordanians perceive and practice their citizenship; they are aware of normative ideals of representation and democracy and they are inclined to take an active part in holding their politicians accountable. Audiences also show a tendency to engage with issues related to public policy and/or community and social issues; 14.6% of participants (14.6% of males and 14.7% of females) engaged through ‘discussing issues’ (both deliberatively as well as emotively). It is worth remembering that the first case study of this thesis, which explored the representation of Jordanian citizens in news coverage of the elections, found that male citizens were more likely to be portrayed commenting on issues than their female counterparts who were, in turn, represented as observers of the electoral process. This trend does not hold true in the cultural public sphere where both genders were as likely to ‘comment on issues’; women therefore assumed roles that were more issue-driven and deliberative within the interactive performances than those they were allocated across the transnational media as Chapter VI demonstrated. Examples of citizens raising policy issues related to their communities or wider society include,

“To Um Omar; regarding the issue of contaminated water, every day we hear of a case of poisoning in the Kingdom. What can you do, or what will you do, about those contaminated water and poisoning cases?” Female, al-Salt 14 November 2007.

“Isn’t it immoral that a female candidate in the third district secures 3000 and 4000 votes for example in the third district and she is not successful, and another female candidate gets 200 votes and is successful?... the deficiency is in the law.” Female, Amman 10 October 2007.
“Legislation against honour crimes, legislation against honour crimes, law number 340 under the penal code, till this day they haven’t [unclear] parliament, and the real obstacle to its passing is parliament itself, not the society, because our parliamentarians are not democratic, they are not.” Male, Madaba 20 October 2007.

Some comments coded under this mode of engagement portrayed citizens questioning official rhetoric over democracy as well as foreign policy associated with the ‘War on Terrorism’:

“If you may I would like to make an intervention. I direct my question to Mrs. Bushra since she is a lawyer. Of course, Jordan is a democratic country, but in the shadow of the one-vote law [current election law], where is democracy?” Male, Irbid 31 October 2007.

“I have a question for Abu Ahmad, on fighting terrorism, ok, which do you think is more important, fighting terrorism or fighting the exploitation of citizen’s dignity, exploiting people’s dignity and their life?” Male, Young al-Tafihle. 11 November 2007.

The implicit critique here seems to be that the official preoccupation with terrorism as a ‘foreign’ threat masks state violations of human dignity on the domestic front. When the actor, as Abu Ahmad, responded that terrorism unites us all in pursuit of security and peace for all Jordanians, the citizen interrupted once again to add,

“Abu Ahmad I believe exploiting citizen’s dignity is terrorism.” Male, Young al-Tafihle. 11 November 2007.

‘Citizens discussing issues’ was not limited to doing so in a logical-deliberative manner; in fact, many issues were also raised by reference to personal struggles as symbolic of wider social injustice. In these two examples, both women make reference to their role as parents unable to fulfil the needs of their children:

“We do not have health insurance, we do not have health insurance. My daughter needs an operation and we can’t afford to pay for her tonsillitis operation.” Female, al-Sweileh 18 November 2007.
"One question, allow me Abu Ahmad, I advise you to withdraw from parliament because we do not need MPs like you, excuse me for having to be this blunt. We do not want an MP who fills his pockets and travels abroad to vacation at the expense of the citizen; where were you when the price of milk went up? Where were you when the price of sugar went up? Where were you when the price of rice went up? Where are you when our children graduate from university, after we have sacrificed our heart’s blood to educate them, and they find no jobs? Where are you all these times? You are travelling, vacationing. We do not need you.” Female, Jerash 7 November 2007.

Similar trends were noted in ‘citizens expressing frustration with past and current parliamentary performance’ as many audience members seemed to speak of personal experience. The mode of engagement accounted for instances in which citizens articulated their frustration with the reality of the political process as well as their pessimism with and disillusionment in the possibility of change. It also included critiques of MPs performance (that extended to feelings of desperation with the political process) and citizens explaining their reasons for abstaining from voting. It is important to note that citizens whose participation was coded under this mode appeared to believe in democratic values and the necessity of change; their frustration and apathy appear to be a result of a system (and/or culture) that has alienated them. Examples include:

"The reason is it is the same outcome. When you vote for someone and you feel he is qualified, once he succeeds he forgets everyone. Even when we do not vote according to tribal and familial reasons, once he is voted in he changes.” Male, Ma’an 29 October 2007.

“They [MPs] listen to no one, they answer to no one”. Female, al-Baka’a 14 November 2007.

"Who am I to vote for? There is no one, no one. All the candidate manifestos do not address the reality we are living in. No one.” Male, Irbid 5 November 2007.

“They have become a drain on our budget”. Female, al-Bak’aa 14 November 2007.
“Most of them have PhD’s or are lawyers, so words are their playing field. It is very difficult for a person to debate with someone to whom words are a game.” Male, Irbid 5 November 2007.

“A blank ballot [is the answer], for you to go, take a ballot paper, and leave it blank is also a solution because, honestly, I go to the elections and the candidates of the district are occasionally not convincing and my self-worth does not allow me to vote for someone I am not convinced of...This is a kind of change, you participate, I mean when you participate with a blank ballot sometimes this is an expression of your point of view and it indicates that you are not convinced of the merit of those people.” Male, Madaba 20 October 2007.

[addressing Abu Ahmad] “We have heard too many manifestos, you have raised too many slogans: democracy, plurality, children, poverty, unemployment, I don’t know what else, they are all old. I am now 19 years old and I haven’t yet heard an MP who said something that represented his people. Everybody wants to succeed and wear a tie. You are all good people to start with, after we vote for you, and put our trust in you, you turn your backs on your country, change your tie, change your office, change your house, change your phone number, change your wife, then move somewhere else. I do not want you to answer me, I am not asking you, I am telling you the reality we are living...and you come and you talk about democracy! You do not even remember democracy - please allow me I like to be critical because I value the truth- and you don’t even remember democracy except a month before the elections... there is no debate of the kind you two are representing here, whenever two MPs meet somewhere they fight, break each other’s backs, then leave... so you come and talk about democracy and then you go and contradict yourself, not just you, all of them, all MPs. I have no hope at all [unclear], pessimism”. Female, Irbid 5 November 2007.

On the two extreme sides of the continuum, however, citizens were more likely to ‘express traditional narratives’ (8.1%) than to ‘express universal attitudes’ (2.9%), the latter was in fact the least expressed mode of engagement across the continuum. The former mode of engagement included instances where citizens advocated particular values, including endearing tribal traditions, and advocated particularism in voting behaviour (voting on familial grounds). They considered any proposition for change a threat to preserved heritage, and insisted that
change is impossible. The category also included instances where citizens started asking for personal favours from the actors (in their role as candidates) or revealed they considered a candidate’s *wasta* when making their voting decisions [*wasta* is a colloquial Jordanian word used to describe the process of rendering personal favours using personal connections (by bypassing government bureaucracy to get papers signed, as an example, but it can also manifest in employing people ill-suited (skill wise) for the job.)]. Examples of citizens expressing traditional narratives include:

“Circumstances required me to go to one of our MPs and ask for him to help me with his *wasta*, he kicked me out of his house. And I am worried you will do the same [if I vote for you]” Female, Sweileh 18 November 2007.

“The most important quality [I seek] is for him [the candidate] to have *wasta*, so he can serve me.” Male, Ma’an 29 October 2007.

“Even if he was not the qualified candidate, not all those who run are qualified and not all those who succeed are qualified. That’s how it is, everyone chooses the person who is related to him.” Female, al-Husun 30 October 2007.

“We are a tribal society, even if my father was unfit I would be obliged to support him…. Let me just tell you one thing, the man who does something different to the rest of his tribe will be rejected by them and disowned.” Male, Irbid 5 November, 2007.

The category also included citizens who expressed particularism in their voting choices with regard to gender, both by females as well as males;

“We are women so we support female [candidates]”. Female, Amman 10 November 2007

“I want to say something. First of all, a woman is not fit to be an MP, that’s my opinion. It’s my opinion…. First things first, a woman has her house, like, it’s a nice thing if she is a teacher, a doctor, something, but not a political legislator, she has no business there. Leave it for men it will be better…it’s male work after all. The person would have to go, come, serve his community, the people, so a woman would be … a man would be better
in these situations. He needs to deal with MPs and deal with ministers and deal with...”

Perspectives advocating a limited role for women were not uncommon, and were most likely to be voiced by young males. More examples include,

“I will choose to vote for a male candidate because a man is more capable of facing challenges he comes across than a woman.” Male, al-Hussun/Irbid 30 October 2007.

“I want to criticise the characters offered in the performance, there is a deficiency in the characters presented, not all possibilities are being presented. I would have wanted to see a candidate in the performance who is male but has Um Omar’s qualities.” Male, Irbid 5 November 2007.

Similarly, ‘citizens expressing a fatalistic attitude’ accounted for instances where citizens were unwilling to accept the possibility of change, even when recognising that the status quo was not ideal. They saw ‘reality’ as necessitating their attitudes and behaviours and discredited the claims of others as ‘idealistic’:

“First of all I would like to say a word to Mrs. Bushra, InshAllah [God willing] you will succeed ...But this is reality, because ever since we are young we are brought up to think you should take care of your cousin and your relative. And so I have a request for Abu Sanad, when you get to parliament don’t forget your relatives.” Male, Irbid 5 November 2007.

“We would be idealists if we say we choose MPs according to their manifestos, too idealistic... if you ask ¾ of the people they all care about having someone from their tribe to serve him, personal favours only, and I would be very idealistic if I tell you yes I read his manifesto and chose him on this basis... negative, yes, but this is reality.” Female, Amman 8 November 2007.

On the other end of the continuum, the least frequently recorded mode of engagement included comments that advocated universal attitudes both in terms of gender and tribal traditions:
“A point of argument for Abu Ahmad. Abu Ahmad, you say and repeat and repeat the phrase ‘I have worked for my people’, but the people you refer to are not the entire population of Jordan, you worked for a part of the people and that is of no concern to us. We are interested in all of Jordan. We want our children to have jobs, to have security like my sister said. All your manifesto is about what services you will provide for your people, aren’t there others beside your people? You have employed people from your tribe, but what about the rest? Jerash has four parliamentary seats, if the four MPs employed people from four tribes, what about the rest? What will happen to the rest? There are a million tribes, not one!” Female, Jerash 7 November 2007.

“Women in general in our society they are not expected to vote, their families don’t let them, I mean the husband or the father or the brother he doesn’t grant her freedom, she has no freedom. She has to be free to express herself and free to vote. She should choose the person she wants to vote for.” Male, al-Ba’ka’a 14 November 2007.

“It should be irrelevant whether the person we vote for is male or female, the important thing is for the candidate to be the most qualified.” Female, al-Salt 10 November 2007.

“I swear I can’t wait till I am older so I can run for parliament, but I don’t want to win through the quota seats. It’s my right, as a citizen.” Female, Irbid 4 November 2007.

Thus, whilst traditional narratives were not the most dominant mode of engagement, they remain more prevalent than universal narratives. The marginalisation of universal attitudes, however, in terms of calling for gender ‘equality’ or ‘active’ participation in the political process (using language associated with human rights groups) is significant because of the ideological undertones of the play scripts which advocated, sometimes didactically, such views. In their extreme forms, particularism and universalism may be seen to represent the ongoing contestation between tradition and globalisation (also in their extreme forms), and tradition may therefore be recognised as having an edge over globalisation. However, conceiving of the two ‘ideologies’ in such static and uncompromising a manner undermines the contestation that occurs within each mode, as well as across the continuum.

A case in point is the ‘citizens negotiating change’ mode of engagement in the continuum; while only accounting for 6.1% of transcribed comments, it represents a means of
understanding how ideological contestation, and associated processes of cultural negotiation and change, occur within Jordanian society. The significance of this mode of engagement lies not in the personal views of those who participated in ‘negotiation’ (their views remain unknown, although we can safely assume that a number of them hold universal values and beliefs), but in the ways in which they contested their identities and needs. Rather than advocate for change using language associated with international human rights campaigns and global organisations (notions of equality and abstract rights), ‘negotiating’ audience members used culturally significant stories (personal and historical), popular proverbs and religious references to ‘anchor’ the change they advocate within the societies they live in. For example, instead of calling for gender equality, they highlighted stories and proverbs which implied that neither gender can realise their needs without the support and respect of the other. Rather than cite rights and obligations, they spoke of respect and understanding, and insisted that change will benefit both males and females. Examples include:

“Abu Ahmad should consider that behind every great man is a great woman... I am interested in the role of women in a culture that teaches us that there is no success accomplished by men without the support of invisible hands, the hands of women like Um Omar.” Female, Ma’an, 29 October 2007.

“Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) consulted a woman... and she told him, when you shave, all the men will shave to imitate you, so a woman’s opinion, especially in those times, is not the opinion of a [naïve] housewife anymore, she is educated and intellectual, and she is even more knowledgeable. Now if you go to an orphan’s house, in our culture an orphan is a person who lost his mother, not necessarily his father; a person who lost his father might still be ok, but a person who lost his mother will be homeless. So a woman is more knowledgeable of a society’s pain than a man.” Male, al-Salt 10 November 2007.

[addressing Um Omar] “I have experienced [running for office] before in the municipal elections, my husband was my supporter and my aid. Some people from the tribe took the same position of the guy who did not support you, but al-Hamdu lillah [thanks be to Allah] we succeeded, and InshAllah [God willing] Um Omar will succeed and everyone will benefit for it.” Female, Madaba 15 November 2007.
Using stories of supportive husbands, brothers or children to ‘negotiate change’ also extended to denials of ‘enmity’ between genders, and the insistence on a complementary relationship that, when fortified, will be of benefit to all of society; for example:

“The world in its entirety cannot exist except with males as well as females, the relationship is a complimentary one, in the name of God we start, and I ask you to consider what I am saying. The entire world, the entire world, needs women and men to coexist and live together. Have you ever heard of a nation that is successful and developed while excluding its women? There can be nothing without complete female participation, so try to understand what we are saying, we are your sisters under God’s eye, so I ask you [males] to support us and we will in turn support you. If we find a male candidate that we believe is the best qualified for the post then I would be one of those citizens who vote in his favour, even if there were female candidates running for the same seat. The basis of our voting choice should be the character of the candidate, what he represents, what his proposed policies are, how will he serve the country.” Female, Ma’an 12 November 2007.

“I would like to comment on the participation of women in these elections and the number of female candidates we have running. Comparing the number of female candidates running this year with previous years reveals a huge difference, and this is proof that women now understand the importance of their participation in the political realm. This would not have been possible without the support of men. Men are not our enemy, they are our husbands and brothers and sons and uncles and we are an important part of this society.” Female, Madaba 15 November 2007.

This attempt to ‘anchor’ the agency of change within community-narratives, and to produce more equalitarian understandings based on historical and cultural specific values, may be a reaction to 1) the persistence of traditional attitudes and, inherently, 2) the failure of universal attitudes to answer to or rest the fears of traditionalists. Referring back to the comment cited earlier which argued that women were ill suited to be parliamentarians, the format of the interactive performances created spaces for such opinion to be contested. For example, after a similar view was articulated in a school in Ma’an, one of the students stood up and protested:
“But why can’t she be an MP? What are the limitations that prevent her being an MP, what are those reasons? Why can’t a woman be a good MP?” Female, Ma’an, 12 November 2007.

The actor, in the character of Abu Ahmad, interrupted to say that he is for women assuming more roles in society, as teachers for example, but that political representation should be left to the men. The school girl answered him again,

“Just like a woman can be a good teacher she can also be a good MP.” Female, Ma’an, 12 November 2007.

The value of this category of citizen negotiation highlights the capacity of the cultural public sphere to act as a medium of genesis and exploration, including the reinvention of the symbolism of the political as a means of opposing culturally repressive understandings. The political becomes the everyday, rather than the abstract. To elaborate, according to Habermas’s normative ideals of logical deliberation (scaled down to a discussion between two people with differing ideological orientations), the better argument (in this case universal values) would ultimately succeed on the basis of its logic alone. This better argument would therefore become the consensus view and form ‘something approaching public opinion’. However, the distribution of commentary across the continuum, particularly the near absence of ‘Citizens expressing universal values’, questions this normative ideal, and suggests that citizens in fact negotiate, rather than deliberate, using a variety of means of expression. This finding is congruent with Nancy Fraser’s concept of contestation between multiple spheres.

As such, rather than rely on abstract ideals of ‘logical-deliberation’, the cultural public sphere, by its engagement of the emotional and aesthetic, explores the reasons why people hold certain views, and this allows for such views to be addressed rather than proven ‘wrong’. The use of culturally-anchored references suggests that citizens who negotiate change understand why traditional narratives persist, perhaps as a form of safeguarding identity and a fear of the unknown. It is therefore not a static category (as those who advocate a ‘clash of civilisations’ thesis may argue) but rather one that emerges out of the challenges and uncertainties of living in a geopolitical climate like that of Jordan’s, which, besides the affinity of conflict around its borders, offers very little security in economical terms as financial woes continue to prohibit development, mortgages remain uncompetitive and hard to get, and pensions are low and not widely accessible. Tradition, and the hierarchy of the tribe, provides
security nets where the state fails to do so. Audience members who negotiated change therefore did so without undermining such safety nets, but by renegotiating the terms of existing structures. They did not, for example, call the tribe patriarchal, but instead spoke of esteemed Bedouin women and the roles they have played in maintaining tribal unity, encouraging the expansion of such roles.

This duality of reaffirmation but resistance, recognition but renegotiation, reveals a richness and diversity to the experiential dimension of the cultural public sphere, especially, in this case, in relation to performative social science. By privileging the experiential, performative social science uncovers the intimate and emotional aspects of social and cultural agency. By modelling change, performances allowed the negotiation and renegotiation of cultural symbols and meanings, that initiated the process of “generat[ing] spectacles of resistance that challenge the local power structure” (Garofian 1999 cited in Denzin 2003: 22) and this locates performance within culturally repressive practices then “creat[es] discourses that make the struggles of democracy more visible” (Denzin 2003: 10).

In fact, while traditional narratives, on their own, were expressed more frequently than universal attitudes, if we are to recognise the role of agency within ‘Citizens negotiating change’ then the weight of the continuum is shifted in favour of universal values. This is further implied when we consider that audiences were less likely to ‘express fatalistic attitudes’ (6.3%) than they were to ‘express frustration with past and current parliamentary performance’ (9.0%), and although both modes of engagement represent disillusionment, the former mode included instances in which participants held on to particular and traditionalist views as a result of their disillusionment, whilst the latter mode included participants who were more likely to express a form of rebellion as a result of their disillusionment, sometimes by deciding not to take part in the political process. Therefore, ‘Citizens expressing traditional narratives’ and ‘Citizens expressing a fatalistic attitude’ are not homogenous ideologies that represent the persistence of anti-modernity in Arab culture (vis-à-vis the ‘clash of civilisation’ arguments), but they do represent values and patterns of behaviour that, for various reasons, maintain the status quo of hierarchy and patriarchy in society. Together, they account for 14.4% of the audience’s participation within the interactive performances. The remaining participatory modes all engage in interventionist and negotiating contestation to varying degrees, including the ability to imagine a normative and ideal political process, the ability to participate and hold politicians accountable, actively discussing issues that affect everyday lives (emotively and deliberatively),
rebelling against the status-quo (even when advocating apathy), negotiating change or providing universal arguments for change.

We are therefore able to identify two trends from the findings thus far: firstly, that counter-narratives that question social and political inequality are invented (and reinvented) using a range of symbolic tools, sometimes embodied, other times affectively expressed, and occasionally argued for using logic and reason. It follows that the second trend is the intersection of the political and the cultural, both in the ways that citizens discussed issues both affectively and deliberatively, but also in their embodying of different forms of political participation (questioning MPs for example) within a cultural public sphere. The binary of political/cultural (and inherently the deliberative/affective binary) are ‘diluted’ with audience members using the cultural public sphere to counter and answer to (through a variety of negotiating strategies) repressive political and social understandings in their everyday lives. The sphere of culture is therefore not limited to the aesthetic and emotive, but is rather a site for contestation that brings together different forms, modes and embodied experiences of engagement and participation. It is a site where cultural values are affirmed but others transgressed, and where the everyday is the basis for identifying wider political injustices and formulating narratives that oppose them. Participants in a public sphere, as the case study has shown, simultaneously use reason and passion to express themselves, to advocate or negotiate for change, or to embody their experiential understandings of themselves as citizens to be ‘represented’ in the more abstract political public sphere.

The work of Nancy Fraser is paramount here. In Rethinking the Public sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy (1990) Fraser critiques Habermas’s account of a single, overarching public sphere and “its claim to be the public arena in the singular” (1990: 66). Fraser goes on to argue that a plurality of competing publics better approximates the ideal of participatory parity than a singular official public sphere. Based on the US feminist challenge to the male dominated public sphere, Fraser advocates a conceptualisation of what she calls ‘subaltern counter-publics’ as,

“parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs” (1990: 67).
The significance of these subaltern counter-publics is two-fold: they function as spaces for withdrawal and regroupment for subordinate groups, and they double as a training ground for developing arguments and strategies to be employed in the processes of contestation with wider publics. It is in this dialectical function, Fraser argues, that the ‘emancipatory’ power of the subaltern counter-publics resides (ibid. 68).

The manifestation of similar trends in the cultural public sphere, such as the formulation and negotiation of counter-discourses and the use of cultural spaces as ‘training grounds’ further informs the role, and significance, of empirically exploring the cultural public sphere in societies undergoing transition. While negotiation and contestation amongst audience members is unlikely to directly influence public policy through consensus based public opinion, as the Habermasean normative ideal requires, discussions within the cultural public sphere contribute to and shape an “enduring tradition of independent criticism of dominant power and ideology” (McGuigan 2005: 440).

Age and location

As noted in the Chapter IV, all transcribed comments and remarks were coded for gender, ‘apparent’ age group and location. This chapter will first discuss how audience participation varied across age group and location before going on to talk about gender differences. It was impossible to know for sure what age group the audience members belonged to, therefore, this coded element was considerably subjective. Three age categories were developed: ≈14-30 year olds, ≈30-60 year olds and seniors. In some instances, coding according to age was easier than others; in a school performance, for example, students were assigned the ≈14-30 age category while teachers were assigned the ≈30-60 year olds category (unless they appeared to be younger teachers which was very seldom the case). Deciding whether an audience member should be classified as a ‘senior’ or placed within the ≈30-60 year old category was more difficult, but what audience members revealed about themselves (for example, whether they were retired or not) at times helped. However, while accuracy was impossible given the open-accessibility nature of the performances, this approximate classification does reveal notable preliminary trends about how participation in the cultural public sphere differed according to age group.
Initial findings reveal that those who most commonly participated in the performances, either through discussion or role-playing, were the =14-30s, whose engagement accounted for 476 (57.6%) of transcribed and coded remarks. Seniors were the least likely to participate, as only 79 (9.6%) of ‘senior’ audience members did so, while =30-60s accounted for 271 (32.8%) of coded commentary and remarks. Again, this does not take account of how many audience members chose to participate amongst those present (for example, given that numerous performances were held in schools and on university campuses suggests that a larger number of =14-30s attended the performances, while senior citizens were more likely to be present in community centre performances of which there were fewer). Still, the ways in which those who did participate did so remains significant.

Age groups displayed similar patterns of engagement, particularly so amongst seniors and =14-30s. All three age groups were most likely to engage by ‘identifying qualities of legislative MPs and describing democratic voting behaviour’, which accounted for 38% of participation amongst = 14-30s, 32.5% of participation amongst =30 -60s and 34.3% of senior citizen’s engagement with the performances. The second most common form of participation amongst the three age groups was ‘directly questioning MPs and/or candidates on performance, actions, ideals or beliefs’ followed by ‘Citizens discussing issues’. Thus far, results reveal similar patterns across all age groups and reaffirm earlier findings which suggested that Jordanian citizens have a good understanding of normative democratic ideals and are capable of exercising democratic behaviour. This was true across all age groups. However, differences did abound; for example, =14-30s and seniors were more likely to express traditional narratives than =30 -60s. The crosstabulation between ‘apparent’ age group and mode of engagement is attached in Appendix III; the discussion below will refer to some of its findings. Due to the variation in the number of audience participants in each age group, considering percentages of ‘within age group’ counts is more significant (as it eliminates the disparity in the original population sizes).

As noted, =14-30s and seniors were more likely to ‘express traditional narratives’ than =30-60s (8.8%, 8.1% and 4.8% respectively) while =30-60s were the most likely to ‘negotiate change’ (7.7% compared to 5.0% of =14 -30s and 6.1% of seniors). In the case of 14 -30s and seniors ‘negotiating change’ was the second least likely mode of engagement after ‘expressing universal attitudes’, whilst in the case of =30-60s it was in fact ‘expressing traditional narratives’ that was the second least likely mode of engagement after ‘expressing universal values’. The box-plot below clearly illustrates that whilst all age groups expressed modes of engagement
across the entire continuum, 30-60s engaged with higher modes of engagement most frequently (the boxes represent the values between the 25\textsuperscript{th} and 75\textsuperscript{th} percentile ranges) whilst the same percentile range of 14-30s and seniors represented lower modes of engagement in the continuum. The median mode of engagement for 30-60s and seniors was also higher than that of 14-30s.

![Box-plot](image)

Figure VIII.b: Box-plot; ‘apparent’ age group & mode of engagement

Senior audience members and 14-30s were the most likely to express traditional/particular attitudes with regards to gender roles. As noted earlier, young male audience members often insisted on a strong private/public divide that confined women to their domestic spheres and only acknowledged greater roles in public life that extended from their role as mothers and nurturers, for example, as teachers and doctors. Examples of 14-30s expressing particular attitudes with regard to gender include:
“I want to ask Um Omar, how are you going to manage your time between your domestic duties and your duties for parliament...a teacher or head teacher finishes work at 14:00 at the latest, so she can be home.” Male, Irbid 5 November 2007.

“I believe that men are more capable of political representation than women. Women should stay at home, that’s one. They can’t bear the responsibility [of political representation]”. Male, Irbid 4 November 2007.

When Muhannad, the moderator, in response named a few Jordanian women who are recognised to have headed corporations or ministries efficiently, the audience member responded,

“These are exceptions”. Male, Irbid 4 November 2007

In one instance, expressing traditional attitudes with regards to gender seemed to stem from gender enmity or fear of women ‘taking over’; in al-Mafraq a young male audience member responded to the moderator’s interventions by saying,

“Wait and see, in 5 years time it’s going to be all women”. Male, al-Mafraq 18 October 2007.

Senior citizens were more likely than younger audience members to express particular gender attitudes under the argument “if the men have failed then women can’t possibly succeed”. Such portrayal continues to sustain the belief that women are less “equipped” for leadership roles. Unlike younger audience members, senior audience members who expressed particular gender attitudes made no references to the dichotomy of the private/public and the confinement of female roles to the former,

“A question for sister Um Omar, she says I want to work on reducing traffic accidents and provide health insurance. Standing in front of you are men, men, and they couldn’t implement a thing. What have you got to say about that? How are you going to implement anything?” Male, al-Karak 17 November 2007.
“[addressing Um Omar] If Abu Ahmad couldn’t help us then you won’t be able to either.” Male, al-Karak 17 November 2007.

When examining how participation varied across both apparent age group and gender, an even more complex picture is developed (as Figure VIII.c below illustrates). Differences between males and females in their modes of participation appear to be least pronounced in the case of ≈14-30s, with the exception that the median mode of engagement is higher in the case of females. In the case of ≈30-60s, again, the whiskers reveal that engagement occurred across the continuum, but female participants reveal a slightly higher percentile range that includes the mode ‘Citizens discussing issues’. The most pronounced difference is amongst seniors, where the participation of male senior citizens proved more widespread across the continuum, but the 25th-75th percentile range and the median correlated towards lower modes of engagement. One male senior citizen did participate by ‘expressing universal attitudes’ but this single instance was a statistically outlier value. Therefore, whilst the age categories are approximate as has been noted, the findings reveal interesting patterns of participation especially when also considered alongside gender.
Indeed, this suggests that the ‘gender divide’ is decreasing, as younger males and females increasingly participate in similar patterns. The decrease in the gender divide, however, is to be juxtaposed with the attitudes discussed above, which reveal that young Jordanian males were most likely to argue for confined roles for women in society and to insist on the ‘home’ as the ‘legitimate’ sphere for female participation. In addition, younger Jordanians, both male and female, appear to engage less readily with higher participatory values than their parent’s generation. This noted weakness in engagement amongst Jordanian youth is gender-blind, and this highlights the need for further empirical investigations that uncover the reasons or implications of such preliminary trends.

It is worth considering whether the medium in question, interactive theatre, is of less relevance or familiarity to Jordanian youths than it is to their parent’s and grandparent’s
generations. As has been noted in the previous chapter, interactive theatre is anchored within Arabic dramatic traditions which situate performance at the site of discussions of social-political issues. However, is participation in such cultural spaces affected by access to multi-media households where television, mobile phones and the internet are available? This same point needs to also be considered when examining how engagement with the modes of the continuum differed according to location. As the frequency table below demonstrates Jordan’s main urban centre, the capital city Amman, also where multi-media resources are most widely available, displays the lowest levels of engagement across all governorates.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location [number of performances]</th>
<th>Frequency (total)</th>
<th>Percent (of total)</th>
<th>Average (per performance)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Valid Amman [5]</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>14.8</td>
<td>24.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ma'an [3]</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>al-Tafileh [1]</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irbid [9]</td>
<td>285</td>
<td>34.5</td>
<td>31.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>al-Zarqa [1]</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>al-Balqa [3]</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>33.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>al-Mafraq [1]</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>al-Karak [1]</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jerash [1]</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madaba [2]</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total [27]</td>
<td>826</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>30.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table VIII.d Frequency table; location & frequency of participation

The percentage of participation per performance is more or less similar across most locations, with the exception of Amman, al-Zarqa and to a lesser extent, Madaba and Tafileh (both of which were closer to the overall average of 30.6). Al-Mafraq recorded the highest average number of participation with 48 coded comments and remarks, followed by al-Karak then Ma'an, al-Balqa, Jerash and Irbid. What is interesting to note here is that al-Mafraq, al-
Karak and Ma’an are all governorates with strong tribal traditions but significant poverty and underdevelopment. Both al-Karak and Ma’an are southern districts and, as Chapter II highlighted, enjoy overrepresentation in parliament (the number of seats allocated the governorates is in disparity to their population sizes). However, this is not the case with al-Mafraq, which has a population equal to that of al-Karak but is represented by less than half the number of parliamentary seats. Nevertheless, initial results indicate that citizens in districts with a strong tribal culture and good representation in parliament were more likely to participate. On the other hand, Amman and al-Zarqa, which are the two most marginalized districts in parliament (the number of allocated seats does not adequately account for the two cities’ population sizes) also recorded the lowest number of participation per performance. However, before we can infer the relationship between political representation and ease/willingness to participate in the cultural public sphere, we must consider the forms of citizen engagement in each of the governorates. A crosstabulation that reveals the distribution of modes of engagement across location is attached in Appendix IV and will be referred to below.

Once again ‘Citizens identifying qualities of legislative MPs and describing democratic voting behaviour’ was the most common mode of engagement across all locales. However, citizens of Ma’an, considered a tribal and conservative governorate, were the most likely to ‘express universal attitudes’ while citizens of al-Mafraq, also a tribal and conservative governorate, were the most likely to ‘express traditional attitudes’ followed by the urban city of Irbid. This indicates significant cultural variation among different tribal communities, and raises questions about the viability of addressing ‘tribal culture’ as a homogenous whole, which currently defines common practice. Also, nearly half of all audience members’ engagement in Amman and al-Tafileh was through describing democratic ideals (‘identifying qualities of legislative MPs and describing democratic voting behaviour’) accounting for 48.4% of audience participation in Amman and 53.6% of audience participation in al-Tafileh. On the other hand, only 10.4% of audience members in al-Mafraq participated in this manner. Audience members in al-Mafraq were also more likely to ‘express fatalism’ than to ‘express frustration’, alongside the citizens of Ma’an. This means that whilst engagement levels in al-Mafraq (in terms of frequency) were the highest, this engagement did not manifest in higher modes of participation. The audiences in other governorates were either as likely to express both, or, in most cases, more likely to express frustration, including apathy, and a form of rebellion against the status
quo, than they were to ‘express fatalism’ or provide it as a reason for their adoption of traditional narratives.

It is interesting to note that there were no instances coded of citizens expressing traditional narratives or fatalistic attitudes in al-Tafíleh, a traditional and conservative southern governorate. In addition, audience members in al-Tafíleh were the most likely to ‘negotiate change’ (accounting for 17.9% of all coded instances in al-Tafíleh). This further implies arguments advanced earlier regarding the role of negotiating change, or ‘bargaining with patriarchy’ within stratified societies in Arab countries. Other governorates where ‘negotiation’ exceeded 10% also showed the lowest percentages of citizens expressing traditional narratives or fatalistic attitudes, with the exception of al-Balqá where participation in the two lowest modes of engagement was weak although ‘negotiating change’ was also uncommon. Due to the difference in the number of performances in each governorate, the sample cannot be taken to be representative. However, it does imply certain patterns of engagement, such as the role of ‘negotiating change’ in reclaiming, or transcoding, cultural signifiers such as tradition and religion from the traditionalists, which may be one reason why when instances of ‘negotiating change’ were prevalent, ‘expressing traditionalism’ was less likely.

If we consider gender as well as location, significant differences gain visibility. Across all governorates, including the capital city of Amman, female audience engagement between the 15th-75th percentiles corresponded to higher modes of engagement across the continuum. However, as the box-plot below indicates, whilst the percentile range represents more frequent engagement with ‘higher’ values on the continuum by women, the connecting whiskers show that instances of engagement with both ends (expressing universal and tradition values) occurred across both genders. Once more, the sample is not representative enough to allow us to draw conclusions about the ways Jordanian women participate in different locales, but it does reveal a notable tendency for women to participate through higher modes of engagement, and this tendency appears true across all locations (but not age groups). A discussion of this finding, as well as others relating to the ways female citizens participated in the interactive performances, follows.
Figure VIII.e: Box-plot; location, gender & mode of engagement

[Figure produced from data using SPSS]
“Thus, the view that women were excluded from the public sphere turns out to be ideological; it rests on a class- and gender-biased notion of publicity, one which accepts at face value the bourgeois public’s claim to be the public” (1990: 61).

It is then fitting to look more closely at the gendering of audience participation in the interactive plays, to uncover how women participated within this cultural public sphere and to uncover whether their participation varied to that of male participants. Initially, as indicated earlier, findings reveal that 404 of the transcribed remarks, comments and heckles were female (48.9%) whilst 422 of them were male (51.1%). Therefore, participation rates, among those who chose to participate, were more or less equal. In addition, as noted earlier, the two most common forms of engagement were identical across both genders indicating that citizens, regardless of gender, had a conceptualisation of what democracy (normatively) should be like and what role citizens assume in the process (with females slightly more likely to express this desired/imagined state).

Other modes of engagement also revealed similar patterns across gender, including ‘citizens discussing issues’ (14.6% of females and 14.7% of males) and ‘citizens expressing frustration with past and current parliamentary performance’ (9.7% of females and 8.3% of males). This shows that both genders were as likely to engage in discussing issues that affected their everyday lives, and they were also as likely to be critical of current political and social practices (through expressing frustration and/or apathy). However, when considering the outermost modes of engagement in the continuum, disparities between males and females become apparent.

To elaborate, only 16 instances of female participants expressing traditional narratives were coded (4.0%) compared to 51 such remarks and comments by male participants (12.1%). Similarly, only 16 women (4.0%) expressed fatalistic attitudes (claiming to commit to traditional values and beliefs because of a perception that change was impossible) compared to 36 male participants who articulated such views (8.5%). On the other hand, 4.5% of female participants expressed universal attitudes, advocating gender equality from a human right’s perspective, compared to 1.4% of male participants who did so. Women were also more likely to ‘negotiate change’, as the mode of engagement accounted for 7.4% of all female remarks coded, compared to 4.7% of male participation. Thus, these findings reveal that citizens were capable of conceiving ideal democratic practice as well as enacting it (though questioning MPs, discussing
issues or being critical of the political process), but when it came to engagement with values and ideological systems, males were more likely to occupy the lower ends of the continuum whilst females were more likely to occupy the higher ends of the continuum. The bar chart below illustrates some of the findings;

![Bar Chart](image_url)

Figure VIII.f: Bar chart; gender & mode of engagement

Looking at the data from another perspective: 76.1% of all remarks and comments coded under ‘Citizens expressing traditional narratives’ were male, as were 69.2% of all
comments coded under ‘Citizens expressing a fatalistic attitude’. On the other hand, 75% of all comments coded under ‘Citizens expressing universal attitudes’ were female as were 60% of all comments coded under ‘Citizens negotiating change’. Once again, similar patterns across gender were noted for the remaining (middle of) continuum modes of engagement, with females slightly more likely to ‘identify qualities of legislative MPs and describe democratic voting behaviour (53.4% of coded comments were female compared to 46.6% male remarks) and to ‘express frustration with past and current parliamentary performance’ (52.7% of comments were female and 47.3% were male). On the other hand, male participants were more likely to ‘directly question MPs and/or candidates on performance, actions, ideals or beliefs’ (51.6% of such comments were male compared to 48.4% which were female) and slightly more likely to discuss issues (51.2% of such comments were male compared to 48.8% which were female). Therefore, whilst male participants were likely to refer to how ‘things are’ (traditions etc.), to keep parliamentarians in check (questioning them through role play) and discussing issues (all attitudes with a closer affinity to the political ‘rational’ public sphere), women were more likely to imagine a different status-quo and to either describe it (‘express universal attitudes’ and ‘identifying qualities of legislative MPs’), to negotiate it or to express frustration with the ‘way things are’. The box-plot below provides a visual aid to the trends;
Chapter VIII: The Performative Public Sphere

Figure VIII.g: Box-plot; gender & mode of engagement

The boxes in the figure represent the values between the 25th and 75th percentiles, and the whiskers connect the values outside this percentile range that are not outlier values (there are no outlier values in this case). The figure therefore illustrates that both male and female participants expressed values across the entire continuum (the whiskers) but that female participants engaged with higher modes of engagement in the continuum more often than male participants. The median, represented in the figure by a thick black line inside the box, is also skewed in the case of male participation towards lower modes of engagement, while taking a ‘middle of the road’ stance in the case of female participants.

These findings affirm Fraser’s arguments concerning the ways in which women contest and negotiate repressive understandings within what she describes as subaltern counterpublics, even when the status-quo is seen to marginalise women. Even within patriarchal and hierarchical structures, such as Jordanian society, women do formulate oppositional understandings of their needs through renegotiating culturally repressive symbols. Whilst
female participation in the performances does not constitute a [conscious] subaltern counterpublic, they represent the forms through which contestation within such counterpublics occurs, and the process by which counter discourses are created from within societies.

It has to be noted that a number of female audience participants were also active members of the Jordanian National Forum for Women (JNFW), which describes itself as the largest grassroots movements working on issues related to female empowerment in Jordan, with over 120 thousand subscribed members across rural, urban and Bedouin populations (JNFW: [http://jnfw.org/](http://jnfw.org/)). On more than one occasion, the interactive performances were scheduled because female activists from local JNFW branches had heard about the plays from their colleagues in other towns where the performances were held, and they would call up the PAC and enquire whether it was possible for the troupe to come and perform the play in their town. The funding the plays received from Freedom House and the EIDHR made this possible; requests were only turned down for time and schedule constraints.

Networking among the different branches of JNFW appeared strong, especially in the southern governorates. Members of the interactive theatre troupe knew many of the most active members of JNFW personally, having crossed paths many times during previous performances. For example, in the past two years the troupe has been performing another interactive theatre performance about domestic abuse (*Muzakarat Imra’a*; literally: Chronicles of a Woman) and had visited many of the centres and schools in which *It’s My Right* and *Elections Round the Corner* were performed. Many times, especially if a performance was held at the request of a local JNFW branch, we would be invited afterwards to lunch (myself as the guest of the troupe), and I got the chance to meet many of those remarkable women. One particular feminist I remember, Hafsa abu Tayeh, had met Muhannd, the plays’ moderator and the troupe’s team-leader, for the first time in the mid 80s when she called the PAC and enquired whether they would be willing to drive down to Ma’an and perform a play at the school where she was head teacher because she wanted her students to see and experience theatre. The PAC complied, but as they were leaving the school the actors found themselves surrounded by an angry mob of males who were outraged that men (the actors) had entered the girl’s school and ‘performed’ in front of them. Muhannd says they were all very scared, and started silently making ‘final’ prayers, until Hafsa walks out with a rifle in her hand and threatens all the men by claiming that the decision was hers, and if someone has a problem with it he should come and speak to her in the morning not harass her guests. If they don’t comply, she warned, they will
each receive a bullet in the forehead. According to Muhannad’s narrative, the mob scattered. Her means are unconventional and controversial to say the least, but the PAC troupe have been to Ma’an many times since to perform, at the girl’s school and elsewhere, and they have never been harassed or threatened again.

Sadly, it is out of the scope of this case study to explore how (or indeed whether) local branches of the JNFW operate as subaltern counterpublics, but the ways in which female audience members participated in the interactive performances, and the ways in which they contested and renegotiated their needs and values, implies that the mechanism that enables subaltern counterpublics is present. This same mechanism can be identified as ‘public spherering’ as described in Chapter I. The presence of such mechanisms within the cultural public sphere is significant in itself, but is all the more meaningful when and if it is researched in comparison to wider publics. To elaborate, Rendall has argued that there is still a need to “explor[e] the gendering of genres” (1999: 481), meaning that the intervention of middle-class women and their agency in shifting boundaries between “fiction, prescription and politics” remains obscure (but fertile ground for further research). By examining the experiences of Western women and their relation to the public sphere, Rendall argues, for example, that Langham Palace feminists shared their commitments through poetry, prose, fiction and history, and suffragists (the likes of Anne Isabella Robertson) wrote first in fictional form on issues of women’s employment and landownership among others (ibid.). Certainly, the cultural sphere of interactive theatre appears to afford Arab women greater and more empowering roles, both in terms of presence and access, in comparison to the political public sphere of mediated news networks.

Miriam Cooke argues that Arab women are evolving “critical rhetorical strategies” that they use to develop “a multiple critique, a multilayered discourse, that allows them to engage with and criticise the various individuals, institutions, and systems that limit and oppress them” (2000: 160). She argues that such multilayered discourses address the transnational “victimisation” of Arab women; firstly, as ‘victims’ of social and political gendering, but secondly, as ‘victims’ of the remnants of colonial rule alongside their male kin. Cooke continues to argue that women are most vulnerable when men are most threatened, and this needs to be acknowledged alongside the wider implications of colonial legacies that burden citizens of Arab states and affect the ways in which they see themselves vis-à-vis the global system. This in turn is affected by the third discourse that ‘victimises’ Arab women: the growing interest in Islam within global politics and the ways in which this has drawn attention to Arab women as “passive
cultural emblems” (ibid.). The significant difference, to Cooke, is that Arab women, unlike Arab men, did not experience colonization directly:

“[T]he European colonizers in the Muslim Arab world found themselves obliged to respect the line that separated the private from the public. To be able to rule the men effectively, they had to leave the women in their segregated spaces. The Europeans interacted with or, better, controlled the Muslim men outside their homes. Women’s autobiographies and fiction as well as court records describe a place of privacy where the colonizer could not go.” (2000: 162).

It is this privacy, or refuge, that has transformed Arab women into “an innermost asylum of Arabo-Muslim identity” (Mai Ghossoub, cited in Cooke 2000: 162). Cooke continues to argue that such historical narratives reject understandings of Arab women as objects of colonial power while simultaneously discrediting the ‘totality’ of European colonial domination, and recognising the role of women as survivors and resisters. In fact, bereft of reactionary experiences to colonization, Cooke suggests that Arab women were allowed to construct strong, oppositional and loyal values which they inscribe today into “a pure, empty past”:

“Because of their marginality under colonialism, their relationship with global capital and culture is attenuated. They are more likely than men to find ways of inventing a humanist nationalism….of holding on to communal, national, and international belonging, that do not entail charges of treachery, complicity, or self-sacrifice.” (2000: 162-163).

Cooke insists that multiple critiques, as a rhetorical stance, is different to identity politics, where identities are contested from the viewpoint of the self, or the essentialised subject, with little regard to the perceptions of ‘others’. She notes that whilst multiple critiques require the same self-awareness as posited by identity politics, its fluidity allows Arab women to address multilayered discourses that respond to and acknowledge the “silencing moves” of others. Thus, “[t]he individual’s goal is to remain in the community out of which she is speaking, even as she highlights and criticises its problems” (2000: 163). Valentine Moghadam describes this as a process of “bargaining with patriarchy”, borrowing the term from Deniz Kandiyouti (1988). Basing her argument on the works of Iranian feminists, Moghadam outlines how outspoken critics of the Islamic Republic and its gender policies, such as Iranian expatriate
Nayereh Tohidi, abandoned their scathing critiques and instead developed counter-narratives of “creative synthesis” (2002: 1146-1147). She insists that ‘Islamic feminism’ of this form rejects the orthodox view of the complementary gender rights and roles, because it emphasises gender differences and segregation. Rather, their mode of engagement is shifted from victimisation and oppression, to resistance and empowerment (ibid.). Like Cooke, Moghadam also recognises that Muslim women are not only pressured by gender policies in their patriarchal culture, but also by external pressures that are seen to threaten national identities and cultural boundaries (2002: 1147).

Thus, the findings discussed in this chapter reveal that the ways in which citizens participate and negotiate symbolic understandings within a public sphere resemble the mechanisms of subaltern counterpublics in the formulation of oppositional discourses and the means of persuading wider publics of renegotiated understandings through a variety of expressive means that are tested and ‘retuned’. This was especially the case with regards to gender, and the ways in which women were more likely to take part in ‘negotiating change’, ‘expressing frustration with the status-quo’ and ‘advocating universal values’. The mode of ‘negotiating change’ is of particular significance and sheds light on the ways in which Arab women have developed strategies of symbolic cultural interaction that attempt to reaffirm cultural values while simultaneously responding and resisting their oppressive connotations. This can be seen as a manifestation of a rhetorical strategy of ‘multiple critiques’ that addresses the various pressures Arab women face, due to historical as well as current events, and which seem to marginalise universal trends associated with individual affirmations of empowerment in favour of communal narratives of emancipation.

Conclusion

This research aimed to explore how Jordanian citizens engage with and participate in an apparent cultural public sphere. The empirical data was collected through attending and videotaping a number of interactive theatre performances which addressed issues surrounding the November 2007 parliamentary elections. The medium of interactive theatre resonates with cultural dramatic traditions in the region, as Chapter VII demonstrated, where social and cultural engagement have historically been sites of contestation over larger political issues. Unlike Western theatrical conventions, Arabic dramatic traditions developed in village centres and
coffee shops, adopting a variety of tools, from elaborate storytelling by travelling hakawatis to fool-wise character parodies that offered satirical but scathing commentary on social injustices. In Jordan, the satirical/political theatre of the everyday continues to enjoy seasonal popularity in the country, most certainly during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. Perhaps this further indicates the association of ‘the theatre of everyday’ with dramatic traditions particular to the region. Participation in the interactive performances which formed the basis of this study needs to be understood within this historical context.

Participants in the interactive performances included urbanised youth, farming villagers and Bedouin communities across Jordan. They also included citizens of all ages, the well to do and the [economically] deprived as well as the literate and the illiterate (who could be identified by their references to thumb impressions (rather than signing or writing a candidate’s name when voting). Thus, while the cultural public sphere was apparent, in the sense that it was not entirely separate from the state, funded by foreign agencies and facilitated by a royal NGO, the ways in which the citizens engaged with the space, and the diverse means through which they raised their concerns, highlights the pervasiveness of ‘public sphering’ in the region, even in the absence of structural safeguards conductive to a liberal public sphere. As this chapter has demonstrated, citizens engaged in issue based contestation where they negotiated with dominant narratives, cultural and political, in their daily lives, thus presenting a different ‘imagined’ status quo. Some of the examples from their participation show that they did so using a range of tools, including the affective and emotive. Few participants spoke of the ‘economic crisis’ in such terms, but many expressed their pain and sense of betrayal at the failure of the government to create enough jobs, or at the parliamentarians showing no concern over the rising prices of food items. This is congruent with McGuigan’s argument about the ‘actual’ forms the public sphere, or rather, ‘public sphering’ assumes:

“In actual fact, when it does happen, keen popular engagement in something like a public sphere more often than not takes a predominantly affective mode; related to the immediacy of lifeworld concerns, instead of the cognitive mode normally associated with experience of a remote, apparently unfathomable and uncontrollable system.” (2005: 435).

The participation of citizens in the performances was transcribed and coded through an inductive process that grouped similar ways of talking and engaging together. A Continuum of
Engagement was developed that represented the diverse ways in which citizens participated marked at one end by ‘citizens expressing traditional narratives’ and the other by ‘citizens expressing universal attitudes’. Significantly, the most common modes of engagement were found to be ‘citizens identifying qualities of legislative MPs and describing democratic voting behaviour’ and ‘citizens questioning MPs on their ideas, performance and experience’, indicating that Jordanian citizens were capable of conceiving normative democratic ideals and enacting normative democratic practices of holding politicians accountable. This was true across gender, age group and location.

In addition, the very existence of the mode ‘citizens negotiating change’ means that reason alone does not account for how social consensus is reached; if it were pure rationality that brought social and political transformation then the category would not exist. ‘Negotiating change’, rather than opposing traditional narratives outright, appears aware of their significance to society, even when the narratives themselves are rejected. Citizen’s use of personal stories and historical anecdotes to ‘negotiate change’ allowed them to ‘anchor’ the change they seek within their societies, recognised to be wary of the effects of globalisation. This introduces notions of subjectivity to the heart of the public sphere theory; citizens do not appear to rationalize and deliberate on issues of public concern as much as they appear to try and persuade, largely relying on personal experiences of perceived injustice. Whether such a form of discursive contestation is in fact successful in calming anxieties of change is out of the scope of this study, but at the very least, the ways in which contestation of this sort resembles Nancy Fraser’s conceptualisation of subaltern counterpublics is one means of further exploration.

Other findings discussed include the relationship between mode of engagement, age group and location. The most significant finding related to the more limited ways in which younger citizens (14-30s) engaged with the modes of engagement across the continuum. In comparison to older participants and seniors were more likely to engage by ‘expressing fatalism’, and less likely to ‘negotiate change’. With regards to location, the capital Amman scored lowest in terms of frequency of participation (when considering an average number of comments per performance) and also when exploring the range of modes of engagement across the continuum. These findings suggest that younger and urban audiences were less likely to participate in the performances, and this highlights the need for further research to understand the issue. It is worth investigating whether this is a result of disillusionment and apathy, or whether the medium of participatory theatre and its rich history
in Arabic dramatic traditions is no longer a ‘natural’ space where younger citizens feel at ease participating. It may well be that they do engage, but do so through other mediums. The correlation between age group and location (the capital Amman, where multi-media platforms are most widely available) is also worth considering.

Jordanian women assumed active and engaged roles within the cultural public sphere, especially when compared to their allocated roles in the transnational news media coverage. Female participants were more likely to engage through ‘negotiating change’ and ‘expressing universal attitudes’ in the cultural public sphere while on the other hand males were more likely to engage through ‘expressing traditional narratives’ and ‘expressing fatalistic attitudes’. Particularly interesting was the category ‘negotiating change’ in which Jordanian women appeared to advocate more universal understandings but not through reference to human rights discourses associated with universal organizations. Instead, they spoke of their personal experiences (and the support of their husbands for them in their electoral bids as an example) to show that positive change is part of our society and not an ‘intrusion’. Other instances included references to religious teachings and historical tales that embody more progressive attitudes towards women. This form of negotiating change was recognised to contribute to the emerging notion of ‘multiple critiques’ as a rhetorical stance that allows Arab women to synthesise their challenges to patriarchal culture with other repressive understandings that affect wider society, such as the experiences of living in non-democratic cultures and the perception of victimisation under the current political world order.

The picture we end up with is incomplete, yet, as an initial exploration into Arabic public spheres as sites of sociocultural engagement it reveals that we must rethink dominant understandings of the theory to account for the nuanced ways in which Arabic publics continue to construct paths to publicness through negotiation and contestation. The failure of the transnational media to engage, or portray, such societal engagement is worth considering, especially with regards to gender. The medium of interactive theatre has allowed us to uncover how ‘public spherings’ is actually manifest at the level of communities. This would not have been possible without the debate on the Arabic public sphere being ‘reframed’ to account for mediums of engagement beyond the transnational news media.
Conclusion: Reframing the Debate on Arabic Public Spheres

What constitutes an Arabic public sphere?

Habermas’s bourgeois public sphere rested on particular historical and geographical bearings, namely, the rise of early industrial capitalism in Western European capitals. The ensuing critiques and debates that emerged out of the original thesis have questioned Habermas’s romanticised narrative and have instead posited that the public sphere should be chartered as a normative ideal to work towards, an ideal that should be continually realised through myriad communication forms, including media platforms as well as what Dahlgren referred to as the processes of socio-cultural interaction necessary for sustaining the practice of ‘public spherings’. This notion of the public sphere as a normative ideal contributes to the universality of the theory and allows for examinations that fall beyond the historical and territorial confines of the original thesis. However, inherent within universality are the challenges of flexibility and presenting convincing arguments from different contexts to re-examine current understandings.

The Arab world is not an organised political centre in the same way that the state and court operated in the eighteenth century in Western Europe, and initially this had implications for the notion of agency central to normative theories of the public sphere. Can we speak of an Arabic public sphere if consensus based public opinion lacks the capacity to affect a central state? As was argued in Chapter I, agency in the Arab world needs to be rethought to account for the many social, cultural and political centres of power that make up Arab societies and that are intertwined and bear influence on each other. It is difficult, if not impossible, to infer when tribal affiliation is a social identity and when it is a political one. This obscurity was also noted to have benefitted the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan who continued to organise and mobilise as a cultural and religious organisation when political activity was banned under military rule. The agency of the public – the making of themselves as citizens – on the domestic level is not nullified by the lack of direct two-way agency, but is instead conceived as one of contestation with and within social and cultural formations, whether familial, religious or kin based (tribal and/or ethnic). In turn, the relationship of those social formations with the state is not one of direct authoritarianism, but is more appropriately described as a politics of accommodation that ensures the sustainability of the state’s dominance by displaying a nuanced if selective appropriation of the demands of certain groups into the centre.
If we can accept that Arab publics are in fact capable of realising forms of agency by contestation within their society rather than directly with the state, then we can also accept that transnational Arabic public spheres are non-territorial, and simultaneously occur and cut across the domestic and the regional. The commonality of language, history and tradition in a region that stretches across the Arabian Peninsula, the Levant and North Africa have created a sense of shared destiny, which has at times in history been cultivated as a political force (pan-Arabism). Even when dialects and historical experiences do differ (post WWII for example different Arab nations were colonised by different Western countries), yet a consciousness constitutive to transnational nationalism has survived. The Arab world, across its different parts, is served by the same mainstream media, and the news in particular covers the two regional conflicts, Palestine and Iraq, on a daily basis. Interest in the conflicts is not episodic, as Western news reports are generally recognised to be, but rather responds to the perception of the conflicts as affecting the entire region. This consciousness is powerful enough to require Arab heads of state to respond to and acknowledge their domestic publics as well as regional publics when making policy decisions. Marc Lynch has described this process as the “production of consensus”; he notes how King Hussein of Jordan, at the point of deciding to sever ties with the West Bank, initially embarked on a process of cultivating domestic consensus though ‘opening’ the official public sphere to debate on issues surrounding national identity. Once domestic consensus was realised, King Hussein started a tour of all regional states with the aim of securing their backing too. Only then was the decision to sever the ties announced. To Lynch, this demonstrates how transnational Arabic public spheres can be power houses of themselves (1999: 268).

So what constitutes an Arabic public sphere? As an umbrella concept, Arabic public spheres are understood to intersect and cut across the transnational and the domestic, bearing influence and affecting each other. Within the domestic public spheres are social and cultural groupings that once again intersect and affect each other as well as the state. These social, groupings, like the transnational public spheres, are also non-territorial and exist within and beyond state borders. In turn, if public spheres are normatively recognised to exist across the political and the cultural, the bourgeois and the plebeian, the dominant and the subaltern, then studies of the Arabic public sphere can also inform our understanding of how public spheres operate across and within the transnational and the domestic. The central question is therefore not whether or not an Arabic public sphere exists, but rather, how public spheres in the Arab region complement and influence each other.
This approach to understanding Arabic public spheres diverges from current debates in
the field which have neglected to account for the plurality of public spheres in the region and
the ways in which they converge to create spaces for public debate and contestation (or indeed
fail to). This thesis aimed to address the limitations of current debates on the Arabic public
sphere by reconsidering the current approach to theory.

To allow for a comparative dimension, the thesis developed two case studies that were
bound by the Jordanian parliamentary elections of 2007. The comparative dimension of the
research rested on three distinctions within public sphere theory: the transnational and the
domestic, the political and the cultural, the abstract and the occasional. The first case study
examined the portrayal of citizen voices in the news coverage of the Jordanian elections (as a
representation of a transnational/political/abstract public sphere) and the second case study
explored the ways in which citizens participated in interactive theatre performances about the
elections (as a representation of a domestic/cultural/occasional public sphere). In both case
studies, continuums were developed to account for the range of public participation
documented.

Thus, bound temporally by the Jordanian elections, the two case studies represent two
‘snapshots’ at a single moment in time each depicting a space that can be identified as an Arabic
public sphere. These snapshots, through the continuums, reveal instances of convergence and
divergence, actual and potential, that can inform our understanding of the relationship between
Arabic public spheres and the extent to which they complement and affect each other.

In the first case study, an examination of the portrayal of citizens in news stories about
the Jordanian elections resulted in a Continuum of Participation that accounted for five different
modes of engagement, starting with the comment-driven and non-deliberative at one end
(‘citizens repeating official narrative’) and culminating in modes of participation that showed an
affinity to the normative ideals of critical-rational deliberation (‘citizens making proposals’). The
purpose of the exercise was to explore the extent to which media platforms performed their
roles as mediators of publicness. Other modes of participation identified in the coverage were
‘citizens responding individually’, ‘citizens engaging emotionally’ and ‘citizens commenting on
issues’. These modes of participation were much more frequently portrayed than the two
outermost modes in the continuum, with ‘citizens responding individually’ accounting for 60.2%
of all vox-pops broadcast in the coverage. It was argued that these findings suggest Jordanian
citizens are portrayed largely as ‘observers’ of the electoral process, invited to comment on its procedures, but rarely involved in processes of discussing issues and proposing solutions.

Following this rationale, the second case study explored the ways in which Jordanian citizens participated in interactive performances related to the parliamentary elections. Through discussions that developed between the audiences and the actors, as well as between audience members amongst themselves, and opportunities at role playing, Jordanian audiences (as ‘spect-actors’) commented, questioned, heckled and argued. Their participation was also transcribed and thematically grouped according to similar ways of talking and participating, and this produced a Continuum of Engagement that ranged from citizens expressing particular attitudes (insisting on the maintenance of tradition) to those advocating universal values (arguing for greater respect for human rights). The Continuum of Engagement also revealed greater diversity in the ways that citizens participated within their societies, including expressing fatalism, identifying normative democratic ideals, questioning MPs on policy proposals, expressing frustration with past and current parliamentary performance, discussing issues and negotiating change.

Points of convergence across both continuums contribute to our understanding of how spaces constitutive to public spheres bear influence on each other. The suggestion here is that transnational public spheres ‘reflect’ modes of ‘public spher-ing’, again reinforcing arguments pertaining to the role of transnational media in mediating an Arabic public sphere (rather than creating it). Similarities identified across the continuums include ‘repeating official narrative’ in the Continuum of Participation and ‘expressing particular attitudes’ in the Continuum of Engagement, both of which represent instances where Jordanian citizens insisted on maintaining the status quo politically (by adopting the government’s rhetoric) or culturally (by arguing for strongly delineated gender roles and insisting on the maintenance of tribal tradition in its entirety). Similarly, both continuums included modes of engagement that represented disillusioned and frustrated citizens, in the case of transnational media this was identified as ‘citizens engaging emotionally’ and in the case of interactive theatre it was described as ‘citizens expressing frustration with current and past parliamentary performance’. Finally, both continuums also represented citizens ‘commenting on issues’.

Other modes of engagement across the continuums suggest resemblances in attitude even if the forms of expression differed. To elaborate, ‘citizens responding individually’ in the
Continuum of Participation portrayed Jordanian publics as observers of the political process whose role was limited to commentary on procedures and personal voting choices. On the other hand, ‘citizens expressing fatalism’ in the Continuum of Engagement included instances in which Jordanian publics rejected the possibility of change and explained their insistence on traditional attitudes within this framework. While different in their forms of expression, both modes of engagement reveal a perception of the role of citizens as peripheral and limited, incapable of extending beyond current practice to affect change, whether in terms of policy or socio-cultural understandings. Similarly, ‘citizens making proposals’ and ‘citizens expressing universal attitudes’ both embody forms of advocacy.

Points of divergence, on the other hand, reveal the degree and quality of the relationship between multiple public spheres. The Continuum of Engagement is found to account for greater diversity of citizen participation than the Continuum of Participation, notably through ‘identifying qualities of legislative MPs and describing democratic voting behaviour’ and ‘directly questioning MPs and candidates on performance, actions, ideals or beliefs’ in addition to ‘negotiating change’. The significance of these three modes of engagement lies in their ideological roles in contesting dominant understandings and serving as sites of disputation; in the case of the former two modes of engagement, this meant ‘imagining’ a different reality that corresponds to normative democratic ideals (and therefore indirectly advocating its realisation), and in the case of ‘citizens negotiating change’ this was manifest in attempts to reinterpret the symbolic. This process of reinterpretation revealed a dual relationship of affirming traditional values while resisting their ‘boundaries’ alongside re-examining cultural and religious symbols (such as stories and proverbs) to contest dominant, and exclusionary, understandings.

Those three modes of engagement, then, correspond to what Dahlgren identified as the ‘interactional dimension of the public sphere’. Dahlgren has argued that the public sphere cannot be dissociated from wider sociocultural interaction in civil society (1995: 151). Citing Cohen and Avato’s (1992) conceptualisation of civil society, Dahlgren maintains that it remains the arena where citizens assemble, organize and mobilize; civil society is still “the vehicle for keeping alive a public sphere in the face of unfavourable media circumstances” (ibid.). In that sense, the “democratic character of the public sphere cannot simply be assumed, but must be continually achieved” (1995: 147). The points of convergence, resemblance and divergence across the continuums affirm this; the mediation of sociocultural interaction, as ‘public sphering’, may be strong or weak, but it ultimately depends on the continual and regenerative
capacity of ‘public sphering’ to sustain it. The points of convergence, particularly, reveal ‘actual’ and ‘potential’ points of realisation of strong public spheres that respond to and inform each other. They are ‘actual’ when they most closely (if indirectly) ‘reflect’ the ways in which citizens participate (through insisting on conservative attitudes, expressing disillusionment or discussing issues). When the portrayal of citizens in these modes was found to be problematic (like the gendering of ‘commenting on issues’ discussed in Chapter VI), the points of convergence identified continue to point towards ‘potential’ points of realisation of stronger, more representative public spheres.

Points of divergence, as was noted, allow us to reflect on the degree and strength of the Arabic public sphere understood as constituting multiple spaces across the transnational and the domestic as well as the political and the cultural that ‘actually’ and ‘potentially’ complement and inform each other. The picture we emerge with, from a comparison of the continuums, is one where ‘public sphering’ within a space seen to constitute an occasional, cultural public sphere reveals greater diversity in the modes of engagement and, crucially, allows for instances of contestation that facilitate the continual regeneration of ‘public sphering’ as a momentum practice that challenges exclusions. The picture is therefore of democratic potential that is, firstly, unrealised, especially when considering the modes of engagement that were not portrayed in the transnational news coverage. This divergence in the continuums therefore reveals that the mediated public sphere in the region remains “weak” and “quasi”, unable to bypass the stratified power dynamics of contemporary Arab societies. This, however, is not seen as constituting Arab publicness in its entirety. The conclusions we emerge with, through a comparison of the continuums, are further enhanced by the findings from each individual case study in the thesis.

The first conclusion to emerge from the first case study of the transnational media was relatively straightforward: when empirically examined, the transnational public sphere was found to afford Jordanian citizens limited roles even in the news coverage of a domestic parliamentary election. This was manifest in the tendency to portray citizens as commentators and observers of the political process, rather than engage with them in more meaningful processes of deliberation and negotiation of meaning. Furthermore, transnational media were found to have a tendency towards closure that equated citizen participation with the casting of the ballot and excluded citizens from debates on policy issues in the aftermath of the elections.
A related conclusion was that the mediated political sphere of transnational media was found to be gendered both in terms of presence and access. Jordanian female citizens were less likely to appear in the news coverage of the elections, and when they did, they were allocated less deliberative roles than their male counterparts; namely, female citizens were more likely to be portrayed ‘responding individually’ and less likely to be portrayed ‘commenting on issues’ than male citizens. In addition, when portrayed as ‘commenting on issues’, female participation was almost entirely confined to gender issues, whilst wider social problems like unemployment, poverty and education were left to male citizens to identify and address.

However, the conclusion to emerge from the second case study revealed that actually existing forms of public sphering continue to survive, including in the form of theatre (identified by Habermas as an occasional public sphere). Even in the absence of a strong and open official public sphere, citizens continued to act as publics capable of holding parliamentarians accountable, discussing issues and problems in their areas, and most crucially, ‘negotiating change’, particularly in the case of women. This process of ‘negotiating change’ allows for the reinterpretation of the symbolic for purposes of contesting exclusionary understandings, all the while anchoring this imagined change within the framework of culture and traditions. While such paths to publicness may lack the ‘consequentiality’ of an official public sphere, they remain vital for its capacity to renew and realise its potential.

Considered alongside each other, the case studies reveal the ways through which spaces constitutive to public spheres intersect and cut across the transnational and the domestic, the political and the cultural, the abstract and the occasional. The picture that emerges is of complementary public spheres that act as sites of disputation in one instance, revealing spaces where ‘public sphering’ is manifest at the level of communities, and as sites of mediation in other instances. As noted, these findings reaffirm the conclusions drawn from a comparison of points of convergence, resemblance and divergence in the continuums, and the means through which ‘actual’ and ‘potential’ spaces that constitute strong publics, or allow the formation of publics, are realised.

Thus, a comparison of both ‘snapshots’ presents a picture of the mediated-political public sphere as limited with a tendency towards closure, while the cultural public sphere continues to manifest in organic forms of participation that allow contestation and negotiation of meanings. Whilst these findings suggest that the ‘official’ Arabic public sphere is ‘apparent’
or ‘quasi’, it also highlights the importance of understanding the public sphere as a process that accounts for the ways in which citizens continue to participate in their societies, reclaiming and reinterpreting the world around them in order to renew and rework the exclusions they face.

In a similar manner, current definitions of what the Arabic public sphere is, and its emphasis on the mediated-political, creates a narrative where Arabic citizens are denied their publicness, and where transnational broadcasters are presented as ‘parachuting saviours’ that endow the Arab citizens the capacity to become a public. In fact, when empirically examined, not only has the transnational-mediated public sphere emerged as limited and with a tendency to closure, but actually existing forms of publicness were identified where citizens negotiated and contested the exclusions they faced, indicating that Arab publics did, and do, participate in public sphering.

This is not to say that the cultural public sphere is ‘better’ than the political public sphere. Certainly, it lacks the ‘consequentiality’ and ‘access’ that would give a strong and open public sphere its edge. However, a recognition of the Arabic public sphere as a process of renewal and renegotiation across the mediated-political and occasional-cultural (as well as other spaces constitutive to public spheres that were beyond the scope of this thesis) accounts for the ways in which citizens themselves form publics and construct paths to publicness. Thus the political and the cultural in the Arab world, and particularly in a country like Jordan undergoing transformation, are seen to inform and influence each other.

The public sphere is therefore not a product of mediation, but rather it is understood as multiple spaces where the formation of consciousness constitutive to publicness manifest and are then mediated, reshaped, and made pervasive as counter-narratives beyond (but also including) the initial sites where ‘public sphering’ emerge. In its strongest form, the myriad public spheres intersect and complement each other through the realisation of spaces where dominant and exclusionary understandings of power (political, economic, social and cultural) are challenged and offered for reinterpretation.

So what constitutes an Arabic public sphere, and to what extent does its pluralism (if we accept its existence across myriad spaces) cause further stratification rather enable communality constitutive to publicness? The empirical pursuit embarked on in this thesis informs a theoretical conceptualisation of the Arabic public sphere that diverges from current
understandings. First, it recognises the ways in which the mediated/abstract/political space of transnational media allow for the realisation of spaces that constitute Arabic public spheres, but it rejects the confinement of the Arabic public sphere to the space of the transnational media. By identifying the transnational media as a space for the ‘actual’ and ‘potential’ realisation of strong public spheres, the empirical findings offer a framework for understanding how the mediated public sphere exists alongside other spaces also constitutive to ‘public shping’. It then allows us to reflect on the relationship between myriad public spheres that exist within and across the transnational and the domestic, the political and the cultural, the abstract and the everyday.

The image that emerges is one where transnational media selectively ‘reflect’ instances of public shping, but they remain ‘potential’ and ‘weak’ spaces for the formation of publics because they fail to realise the latent democratic possibilities of more engaged forms of disputation. They also remain captive to exclusions, here on the basis of gender, and therefore fail to critically account for questions of access, including who constitutes ‘the public’ and who speaks on its behalf. This relationship of ‘weak’ and ‘potential’ engagement is not seen to be static, but rather understood as retaining the capacity to change over time. How and where this relationship changes remains the central question to our understanding of the Arabic public sphere. It is a question which the two ‘snapshots’ provided helped identify, but can only be addressed through further empirical examinations that allow us to add a temporal dimension to this analysis.

The need for more empirical studies that examine the viability of transnational networks is therefore crucial. Equally crucial is the need for empirical research that explores the wider societal processes of negotiating change and forming new publics, such as counterpublics, that partake in contestation over cultural meanings and resources as a means of addressing exclusion. To quote Dahlgren once again, although television is the main institution of the public sphere, it is not the public sphere in itself, “Television’s discourses are juxtaposed with other experiences of everyday life – sometimes confirming them, sometimes framing them in a mythic way, sometimes challenging and contradicting them” (1995: 148).

The second relationship that the ‘snapshots’ help identify relates to the ‘space’ of occasional-cultural public spheres as ‘training ground’ for subaltern counterpublics. As noted in Chapter VIII, feminist groups such as the Jordanian National Forum for Women (JNFW) and the
Jordanian Women’s Union (JWU) were not only vocal in their participation in the interactive performances themselves, but were also active in organising the performances (where and when they were held), requesting performances (having developed personal relationships with members of the arts centre over the years) and publicising these performances in their communities beforehand. These feminist groups more closely resemble Nancy Fraser’s subaltern counterpublics because they are identity-based and homogenous with a view towards addressing a specific form of exclusion. Fraser identified the relationship between subaltern counterpublics and the ‘official’ public sphere as one of contestation. The interactive performances in this case study, as a space understood to constitute an occasional, cultural public sphere, can be understood as the ‘space’ where this contestation – between subaltern counterpublics and the wider ‘public’ they seek to persuade – is manifest.

Crucially, this process of contestation and negotiation of dominant and exclusionary meanings is relevant in understanding how marginalised groups, here women, continue to actually participate. The gendering of the mediated public sphere, therefore, accounts for institutional and cultural hierarchies that need to be addressed, however, they do not constitute the entirety of publicness in the Arab world. While Jordanian women were found to be marginalised in the news coverage of the Jordanian elections, this should not be read to mean that female participation in Jordanian society is weak or absent. Rather, the ways through which Jordanian women were found to contest the symbolic, within their communities, should be read as a political and emancipatory act.

Hence, we can conceive of a transnational/political/abstract public sphere that ‘actually’ and ‘potentially’ mediates formations of publicness, understood as processes of contestation and disputation. The degree and quality of this mediation can be critically assessed by examining convergences, resemblances and divergences between portrayed publicness and instances of ‘public sphering’. In turn, theatre is conceived as constituting a domestic, occasional and cultural public sphere where processes of disputation and contestation between publics are realised. This interactional dimension of the public sphere is necessary for the realisation of normative democratic ideals which require a continuous process of renewal and regeneration to insure the sustainability of democratic practice. Finally, these spaces allow marginalised groups, in the form of subaltern counterpublics, to negotiate their exclusion symbolically. They do so by resisting dominant and exclusionary narratives with the aim of harnessing pervasiveness in the process. Their interaction in the cultural public sphere
(recognised as a relationship of contestation) needs to be understood as a form of agency; they seek to influence socio-political formations around them – religious and cultural – as a means of ultimately affecting state policy. As was noted earlier in the conclusion, authoritarianism in the Arab world should not be understood as a top-down relationship, but rather one that responds to changes and demands at the level of social and cultural formations (which intersect with the political). The transnational media in the Arab world continue to have an important role in the mediation of publicness. They remain capable of mediating ‘public sphering’ as a process and enabling it to inform and renew the mediated-political public sphere. They can also, potentially, make ‘public sphering’ more pervasive on the regional level by bypassing national boundaries and then informing and enriching the interactional dimension of domestic public spheres by offering counter-narratives developed in other subaltern counterpublics. Reframing the debate on the Arabic public sphere, as this thesis advocates, therefore does not negate the role of the media, but shifts the emphasis away from current understandings of the public sphere as a product that is empowered by communication technologies. Mediation remains an integral part of the process, but it is not the entire story.

The stability of Jordan and the relative spaces for participation and disputation it allows, particularly impressive in light of its geopolitical climate and the regional events it continues to weather, make it an ideal case study especially for uncovering existing forms of ‘public sphering’ and citizen participation. The ways that citizens do in fact participate, even when the official public sphere is weak or closed, can help build and contribute to a theory of the Arabic public sphere that accounts for the processes of renewal and regeneration vital to the viability of the public sphere as a process. The public sphere is thus understood as a multiplicity of publics that engage in dialogue, negotiation and persuasion as a means of challenging dominant and exclusionary meanings and symbols. These public spheres, rather than being discussed as emergent phenomena, are explored as existing processes in multiple spaces, political and cultural, rational and emotive.

Indeed, a robust and healthy domestic Jordanian public sphere will ultimately depend on successfully engaging the organic patterns of ‘public sphering’ in everyday life, mediating these experiences in a more open manner and in turn bearing influence on the official political public sphere. The weakness of parliamentary performance and the ideological dearth of parliamentary discussion hinder the capacity of such convergence, and maintain the disconnection between citizens who act as publics in their locales and a mediated sphere that
reports on parliamentary procedures and events. At no point should the public sphere be understood as constituting this latter only; as this thesis has attempted to demonstrate, the Arabic public sphere must be understood within a wider framework that accounts for the processes of public contestation and negotiation of power, both political and sociocultural, symbolic and discursive. This element of sociocultural interaction remains vital for a public sphere to maintain its capacity to renew and regenerate. The viability of the public sphere as a whole rests on the capacity of the multiple sites of the public sphere to inform each other, engage and converge. The mass media continue to be central in this communicative process, as they alone are capable of facilitating this fluidity. Their mechanism of mediation should at all times be examined, but it should not come to constitute what the Arabic public sphere is in its entirety, as has been the case for too long.

The hope is that the snapshot provided here, whilst empirical in the first instance, has grown to contribute theoretically to our understanding of publicness in a region that is much debated, but it seems to me, little understood. This approach to the Arabic public sphere invites us to look beyond the news media in search of Arabic publicness and instead to re-engage with Arab citizens, to document their experiences, challenges and hopes. It encourages us to actively seek alternative forms of expression, in both the political as well as the cultural public spheres, and to investigate and analyse what we find. By recognising the interactional dimension of public sphering, and the relationship of contestation that sustains it, we are also acknowledging the role of Arab citizens in the formation of strong publics. By neglecting Arab citizens, and the ways in which they continue to exercise their citizenship, our theory of the Arabic public sphere will remain a conceptualisation of a ‘space’ rather than a spatial conceptualisation of the formation of publicness. Only by rethinking, and criticising, our current research practices can we produce a theory of the Arabic public sphere that is more sensitive to the nuances of reality.
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Niebuhr, Carsten (1792) *Travels through Arabia and Other Countries in the East*, London: Morrison and son.


## Appendix I: Crosstabulation; news channels & levels of deliberation

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[Table produced from data using SPSS]