

Book Review: Watching Arabic Television in Europe: From Diaspora to Hybrid Citizens by Christina Slade

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What are Arab Europeans watching on television and how do programmes affect their identities as Europeans? In *Watching Arabic Television in Europe*, **Christina Slade** argues that hybrid television cultures of the sort found among Arabic speakers in Europe, enhance rather than detract from the culture of civic life in Europe. Journalists reporting on Arab and Muslim issues would benefit most from reading this book, concludes **Cheryl Brumley**.

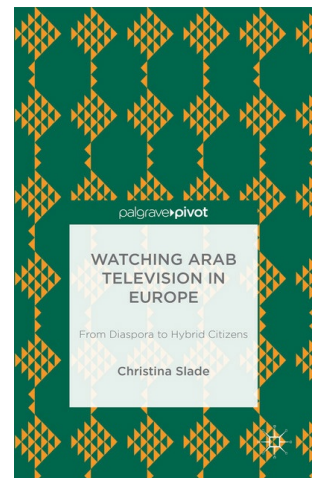


Watching Arabic Television in Europe: From Diaspora to Hybrid Citizens. Christina Slade. Palgrave. 2014.

Find this book: 

“I am not a European,” begins Christina Slade’s new book, *Watching Arabic Television in Europe: From Diaspora to Hybrid Citizens*. Slade’s interest in transnational media and civic engagement is no doubt a product of her own outsider status and experiences with politicised immigration regimes.

Slade, a native Australian and Vice Chancellor of [Bath Spa University](#), recalls a time when she spent hours queuing for a visa that would grant her stay for a professorship in The Netherlands. To while away the hours, she struck up conversations with the mainly Moroccan immigrants around her. As a professor in media theory, it was inevitable that conversations would lead to their media consumption habits: What television shows did they watch? What newspapers did they read? In what language? For Slade, this “mediated common culture of the modern world” said far more about a person’s civic engagement than their ability to correctly answer questions on royal lineage, as is the case with many European citizenship tests.



Watching Arabic Television is rich with quantitative and qualitative evidence. The data derives from a [European Commission funded project](#) led by Slade which surveyed Arabic speakers from Amsterdam, Berlin, London, Madrid, Paris, Stockholm, and Nicosia. The survey, the first of its kind to span seven cities across the continent, is impressive in its ambition and execution. Slade and her academic partners no doubt had to navigate many difficulties in their interactions with Arab communities, often on the margins of influence of European life. Trust and access could not have been easily won.

The results from the survey are used primarily to challenge the common assumption that Arabic media consumed in Europe tethers Arabs to their homelands, in turn reducing their chance of assimilation and reinforcing values from abroad which are directly at conflict with the values of their host country.

This stereotype, Slade contends, is reinforced from the highest parapets. Nicholas Sarkozy’s [2009 announcement](#) of proposals to ban full-face veils like the burqa and niqab is a particularly illuminating example: “In our country, we can’t accept women prisoners behind a screen, cut off from all social life, deprived of all identity. That’s not our idea of freedom”.



Who Wants To Be A Millionaire, on Dubai-based channel MBC. Credit: Jerry Michalski CC BY-SA 2.0

To Slade, Sarkozy's ban was really making a connection between veils and a rejection and disengagement with France's secular democracy. Based on the surveys in her study, however, Slade finds this isn't the case at all. Veiled women are:

"connected to French society through work and the schooling of children and family...they are most likely critical viewers of French television, listening to French radio. They, together with their families, discuss French politics. They have a strong sense of connection to society and to France" (p 9).

Additionally, the book's greatest strengths lie in Slade's commitment to widening the debate around citizenship, integration and transnational belonging past the boundaries of media theory. The author comfortably weaves in theory from [Habermas](#) to [Nussbaum](#), and nods in the direction of key works in other disciplines like anthropology ([Abu-Laghd](#)) and social psychology ([Billig](#)).

These inclusions give weight to the latter chapters, where Slade sets out an alternative model of citizenship; one that accounts for the transnationalism evidenced in the media habits of Arabic-speaking immigrants.

Yes, most Arabic speakers watched Arabic channels, but most Arabic speakers also watched local channels, in a European language, especially to get a balanced view of events in the news. This constant oscillation between different languages and cultures, Slade argues, has created a new space: borderless but unmistakably a space rooted in Europe. This new space is reflective of their ideas about European citizenship.

"[In the survey] Arabic speakers clearly understood the advantages of European citizenship and appreciated formal citizenship, the possession of a passport and the rights and duties associated with it. Yet there was a hankering for a sense of belonging and for the more amorphous and emotionally loaded cultural aspects of citizenship such as religion" (p 106).

Slade is very passionate about countering socially-constructed prejudice and rightly points out that the media

plays a role in creating false dichotomies between Arabs (often incorrectly conflated with Muslims) and the West. Sarkozy's veil ban was reflective of a national media which pushes Arab communities into dismissible margins. More could have been mentioned about media and its part in hardening public attitudes towards Arabs, and Muslim Arabs in particular. The media's focus on differences rather than on common underlying beliefs minimises the notion of citizenship and instead draws-up reactionary sets of criteria in the place of more inclusive models. This is an important point which should have been foregrounded.

As a Palgrave Pivot book, *Watching Arabic Television* aims to be longer than a journal article but shorter than your average academic book. As a result, the material is very up-to-date for a published academic work. As an academic output it may be out of reach of journalists and those outside of academia who would benefit most from reading it.

The book's main takeaway is that dialogue, rather than assertions of difference, could restore fortress Europe. A good start would be to change how journalists report on Muslim and Arab issues, in a way that doesn't re-circulate an irrational fear of 'the other'. My hope is that Slade will expand the reach of the book by blogging about her research to increase her chances of reaching these groups of people and facilitating a more helpful dialogue.

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