Local for Locals or Go Global: Negotiating how to Represent UAE Identity in Television and Film

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Abstract

This dissertation in Middle East Studies explores the creation of national identity through visual media in the contemporary United Arab Emirates. Within a framework of cultural and media studies the thesis analyses how forms of representation are negotiated by Emirati media producers. The research tests the applicability of cultural theories developed by Appadurai and Eickelman in the context of the Gulf Region.

The UAE media industry is considered within a network of global media companies. The local industry's interaction with global media production companies illustrates a constructed divide between local and global identities. This creates specific patterns of media making and influences local audience perceptions of different narratives and representations.

The research uses qualitative methods, based on interviews and focus groups conducted between September 2009 and April 2010 in Abu Dhabi and Dubai. The interviewees were Emirati media professional and Students of Media Communication. They discuss how media producers and television presenters try to reconcile their notions of what a national media should be with the restrictive structure of the industry. The interviews demonstrate the challenges of a government-controlled national media for the development of a public dialogue on national identity and confirm that the state-controlled television and film industry, does not account for the diversity of the Emirati community of nationals.

The criticism of Emirati representation in the media is accompanied by a feeling of stagnation and inability to change the existing patterns. It results in their turning away towards commercial media. Going beyond an analysis of restrictive media praxis, the research provides an inside perspective on the complex issue of contemporary Emirati identity.

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