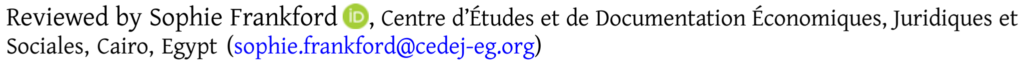
Media of the Masses: Cassette Culture in Modern Egypt

Andrew Simon (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2022). Pp. 304. $90.00 cloth, $30.00 paper. ISBN: 9781503631441



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In *Media of the Masses,* Andrew Simon skillfully traces the social life of a single mass medium—the cassette—in mid- to late-20th century Egypt, to provide "a panoramic history of a modern nation through the lens of an everyday technology" (p. 2). Offering an in-depth engagement with Egypt's cassette culture, he presents a richly researched and thoroughly engaging study. Three main arguments run throughout the book. First, Simon convincingly argues that cassette technology "decentralized state-controlled Egyptian media long before the advent of satellite television and the internet, enabling an unprecedented number of people to participate in the creation of culture and the circulation of content" (p. 3). The emergence of cassette technology in Egypt, he shows, was inextricably linked to broader sociocultural transformations, with Sadat's *infitāḥ* (program of economic liberalization) facilitating the importation of cassette technology but also contributing to the emergence of a new class of nouveau riche whose presence worried the old cultural elite. Second, Simon proposes that a focus on sound can enrich our understanding of the Middle East, noting that historians of the Middle East have "long overlooked the acoustic as a site of serious engagement" (p. 9). Simon acknowledges existing scholarship on sound in the region by anthropologists, (ethno)musicologists, and religious studies experts, but notes that the majority of this work (especially in the Egyptian context) focuses on either state-sanctioned musical artists or the role of sound in relation to Islam. Simon, on the other hand, aims to paint "a more nuanced picture of Egypt's acoustic culture" (p. 11) by putting state-sanctioned and subversive voices into conversation.

Simon's third major argument relates to methods. Noting the many difficulties that historians of Egypt face in accessing archives, ranging from "missing documents, censored periodicals, restrictive research clearances and shuttered state archives" (p. 12), he asserts the need for alternative sources, or using what he calls a "shadow archive." This shadow archive, which formed the basis of his own research, encompasses visual, textual, and audio materials that exist outside of the Egyptian National Archives. It includes sources from "official" and "informal" settings, "from street markets and public libraries to private holdings and commercial enterprises". In addition to utilizing films, memoirs, consular reports, personal photos, and oral interviews, the book relies heavily on detailed analyses of two state-controlled magazines, *Ruz al-Yusuf* and *Akhir Saʿa*, read against the grain to reveal topics that "escaped 'official' records altogether" (p. 13).

These themes unfold over the course of an introduction, six thematic chapters, and a conclusion. The thematic chapters are divided into two parts: Part 1 (Chapters 1–2) explores the advent of cassette technology in Egypt in relation to a wider culture of consumption under Sadat, and Part 2 (Chapters 3–6) considers the impact of cassette technology on "the creation of culture, the circulation of content, and the writing of history" (p. 3). Chapter 1 takes a photograph of three men posing with a cassette player as its starting point. Tracing who the men are, and the subsequent circulation of the photo on social media, Simon explores how Egyptians first encountered cassette technology, as well as the medium's wider commercial life, to offer "an alternative history of economic change" (p. 19) during the period of Sadat's *infitāḥ* and its aftermath under Mubarak. Chapter 2 unpacks the commercial life of cassette technology, focusing on its "criminal biography." Based on a counter-reading of crime reports of theft and smuggling in the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743823000582 Published online by Cambridge University Press

popular press during the 1970s and 1980s, Simon shows that, although the reports intended to praise the security sector, they unintentionally revealed a thriving black market that was all but impossible to police.

Moving to Part 2, Chapter 3 explores debates about the perceived vulgarity of cassette tapes, which Simon contends had less to do with mere aesthetic sensibilities than a struggle over "what constituted Egyptian culture and who had the right to create it" (p. 81). As he shows, cassettes didn't always carry "vulgar" voices like that of *shaʿbī* singer Ahmad ʿAdawiya; the state-owned record label Sawt al-Qahira also often produced cassettes that aimed to refine public taste and cultivate cultured citizens. Chapter 4 considers cassette piracy from the perspectives of varied actors including state employees, private citizens, musicians, and police officers, highlighting the opportunities that copying cassettes gave for anyone and everyone to become a cultural distributor. This point is further illustrated in Chapter 5, which describes the importance of cassettes in enabling the voice of subversive singer Shaykh Imam to circulate. Chapter 6 brings readers into the 21st century. Drawing on conversations with a religious scholar, the director of a music library, and an electronics dealer, Simon considers what remains of Egypt's now-fading cassette culture.

The strengths of the book lie in its engaging topic, its contribution to the history of new media, and its argument about how cassette technology informed broader political, economic, and cultural developments in modern Egypt. The contributions relating to consumption and cultural production are particularly insightful. Two aspects of the book could have been pushed further, however. First, the goal of understanding the cassette's role in sociocultural transformations could have been advanced by interrogating some key concepts in more depth. The phrase "ordinary Egyptians" occurs frequently, sometimes standing alone and sometimes in contrast to "elite Egyptians." I was left wondering what exactly was meant by "ordinary" in terms of class, gender, and religion. Attending to who and what were considered ordinary, by whom, and how this has changed would have added nuance, especially to Chapters 3 and 5. The same can be said of another recurring concept, "the masses," which, given its important conceptual positioning in the book, would have benefited from some unpacking. The "masses" associated with ʿAdawiya (Chapter 3) are notably different from the "masses" associated with Shaykh Imam (Chapter 5), for example, which is masked when the concept is taken as a given. Simon is not alone in this; it is a feature of much historical and anthropological writing on Egypt to use these categories at face value, but doing so serves to obscure dimensions of Egypt's shifting social dynamics that this study could have further elucidated.

In this regard, Chapter 6 is perhaps the most illuminating part of the book. Based on conversations and oral histories the author conducted, we get a real sense of who these "ordinary Egyptians" are. We are introduced, for example, to Mansur at Sharikat Egyptphone, the owner of a cassette company and shop in the Shubra neighbourhood. Fascinating details about how he found artists to record, how he marketed cassettes in microbuses, and how he imported tapes from Saudi Arabia all supplement and add nuance to the information about cassette companies provided earlier in the book, gleaned from periodicals. Simon notes that oral histories will "prove central to many future interdisciplinary inquiries" (p. 176) into Egyptian and Middle Eastern mass media, and the richness of Chapter 6 demonstrates the benefits of integrating this method whenever possible.

The second aspect that could have been explored at greater depth relates to Simon's claim that he "set out to explore the social life of sounds" (p. 182). Although the book very effectively explores the social life of cassette tapes and players as material objects, the focus on sound itself is less developed. When attention is paid to the sounds emanating from cassettes, it tends to be in relation to lyrical content or broad overviews of musical styles. I wished to know more about, for example, the materiality of the distinctive cassette sound: following the lead of scholars like Brian Larkin, what could be learned from thinking about the social life of the characteristic graininess of cassettes, the "hiss" that is often audible before (or during) tracks, or the noticeable degradation of cassettes' audio quality

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743823000582 Published online by Cambridge University Press

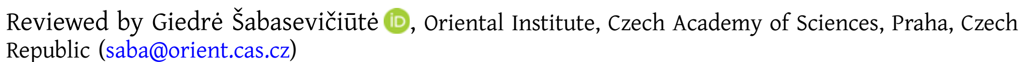
through repeated use? That the book invites these questions but does not speak to them directly attests to the great deal of research still to be done on sound cultures in the Middle East.

Overall, I highly recommend *Media of the Masses*. Written in an accessible style, it will be of great benefit to scholars, graduate students, and undergraduates interested in Middle Eastern history, media studies, and (ethno)musicology. It also will be of interest to nonacademic readers interested in Egyptian popular culture.

doi:10.1017/S0020743823000582

The Last Nahdawi: Taha Hussein and Institution Building in Egypt

Hussam R. Ahmed (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2021). Pp. 312. $90.00 cloth, $30.00 paper. ISBN: 9781503615342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The Egyptian man of letters Taha Hussein is perhaps the most studied Arab intellectual, as scholars have sought to account for his formative role in the Arab cultural renaissance, or the Nahda. There is a rich body of scholarship on his contributions to the development of modern Arab literature, criticism, and education, and his overall promotion of secular culture at the price of his multiple confrontations with Egypt's religious elites. Less well-known is Hussein's long and dynamic career as a civil servant in Egypt's various cultural institutions, which he helped to shape. During his lifetime, Hussein served as Cairo University's Dean of Arts, a senior civil servant in the Ministry of Public Instruction, including a period as controller of the general culture department, which would later give rise to the Ministry of Culture, and a member and, then, president of the Arabic Language Academy. Despite Hussein's prominent position in Egypt's cultural bureaucracy, and the likelihood that this presence was at least partly responsible for the spread and longevity of his ideas, Hussein's involvement in state institutions has not been studied by scholars in a systematic fashion. *The Last Nahdawi: Taha Hussein and Institutional Building in Egypt* by Hussam R. Ahmed intends to fill this gap by locating Hussein's writings in the context of his institutional career. In so doing, it seeks to revisit the established narratives on Hussein, his intellectual generation, and, more broadly, the historical period in which he worked, Egypt's parliamentary era, situated between the two nationalist revolutions of 1919 and 1952.

By adopting an institutional approach to Egypt's intellectual past, as opposed to a purely textual one, the book participates in the recent renewal of the field of Arab intellectual history. For more than a decade, this field of study has witnessed the emergence of works that shifted the scholarly focus from the analysis of public texts to that of infrastructures, material cultures, and social formations. Such a shift, dubbed by scholars as the "material turn," has not only shed new light on intellectual production and debates but also dismantled the binaries that have long dominated discussions of Arab intellectual worlds: modernist/traditionalist, secular/Islamist, and Westernizer/conservative. As Ahmed explains, Hussein has often been the victim of such binary classifications himself (p. 40). Praised in early European scholarship for his cultural proximity to France, Hussein, following the rise of postcolonial studies, was often represented by scholars as a pawn of European colonialism with doubtful allegiances to anti-colonialism. In these polarized and passionate debates,

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