

PEER REVIEW ARTICLE

Reality Television and Politics in the Arab World: Preliminary Observations

Abstract

The most popular and controversial television programs in the Arab world are “reality” shows like *Super Star* and *Star Academy*, broadcast by satellite to viewers from Morocco to Iraq. These shows claim to be live, non-scripted and therefore “real”. Many rely on audience participation in the form of voting for favorite contestants. In the wake of controversy triggered by *Super Star* and *Star Academy*, some observers have hailed reality television as a harbinger of democracy in the Arab world. This article explores the complex ways in which Arab reality television can be described as political and poses questions about the role of reality programs in the Pan-Arab public sphere. Based on fieldwork, textual analysis, and interviews with television producers and market researchers, this article concludes with preliminary observations on the political implications of Arab reality television.

Introduction

Reality television (1) entered Arab public discourse in the last five years at a time of significant turmoil in the region: escalating violence in Iraq, contested elections in Egypt,

the struggle for women's political rights in Kuwait, political assassinations in Lebanon, and the protracted Arab-Israeli conflict. This geo-political crisis environment that currently frames Arab politics and Arab-Western relations is the backdrop to the controversy surrounding the social and political impact of Arab reality television, which assumes religious, cultural or moral manifestations. This article explores the connections between Arab reality television and the political, economic and socio-cultural forces that animate contemporary Arab public discourse. It offers observations on how public contention about reality television articulates these forces to issues such as inter-Arab relations, democratization and political participation. The article concludes with questions, to be addressed in future research, about the ways in which public contention around reality television overlaps and spills into Arab political life.

Specifically, this article offers preliminary analysis of public discourse surrounding three reality television programs, *Super Star*, *Al Ra'is*, and *Star Academy*, used as comparative case-studies to map the dynamics of contention in the Pan-Arab public sphere. The analysis is based on seven months of fieldwork in Beirut and Dubai in 2004 and 2005, including more than 100 interviews with people involved in production, promotion, evaluation, and research on the audience of Arab reality television programs, in addition to textual analysis of around 50 hours of the programs themselves.(2) This initial research indicates that reactions to Arab reality television fall in two broad camps. On one hand, there is a large group of young people and adults who follow reality television programs, some of them more or less regular viewers, others avid fans, making some reality television shows the most popular programs in Arab television history. On the other hand, there is a relatively small but vocal minority of religious leaders and political

activists who have condemned reality television because in their judgment it violates Islamic principles of social interaction and/or facilitates cultural globalization characterized by Western values of individualism, consumerism, and sexual promiscuity.

This article recognizes that opinions on reality television in the Arab region are more diverse than the two broad categories mentioned above, including those who dismiss reality television on the grounds that it is contrived dramatically, mediocre artistically, or simply not very interesting. To that end, it seeks to distinguish competing political, religious and economic discourses that are compelled into public debate on the impact of reality television on Arab societies. This article is drawn from a working book manuscript,⁽³⁾ and therefore it is best construed as offering a set of preliminary observations rather than definite interpretation. These observations will focus on the overlaps between popular culture and politics in the context of the public controversy surrounding reality television, within the framework of the relationship between the broad categories of “politics” and “entertainment.”

Politics and Entertainment

Long treated as two distinct and separate spheres, the realms of politics and entertainment have become increasingly related in mass mediated societies where they both rely on celebrity and public recognition. The overlap is probably most pronounced in the United States since 1992, when presidential candidate William Jefferson Clinton played his saxophone on MTV. This issue took surreal dimensions nearly a decade later when World Wrestling Federation ex-star Jesse “The Body” Ventura won the governorship of Minnesota as a third party candidate against two powerful mainstream opponents. In the

late 1990s, US television, from celebrity gossip shows to serious network news, was abuzz with rumors of Hollywood stars and business tycoons running for political office: Warren Beatty, Clint Eastwood and Donald Trump were imputed political ambitions, rumors that most of them did nothing to undermine. Even after the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States, when pundits proclaimed the end of both innocence and insouciance, and the return to more serious matters of state, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Austrian-born Mister Universe turned Hollywood action hero, was elected governor of the American state of California. Michael Moore's Academy Awards diatribe against George W. Bush in 2004 was watched by millions throughout the world, triggering widespread commentary in the international and Arab press. The United States continues to be, in the words of Neil Gabler, the "republic of mass entertainment."⁽⁴⁾

Elsewhere in the world, the connection is less patent, but signs of it exist everywhere.

The transformation of Cicciolina from porn-star to member of the Italian parliament, Bob Geldof's crusade for debt relief in the developing world, and Indian movie stars dabbling in politics, are all indications of blurring boundaries between entertainment and politics, with most "cross-overs" being from the former to the latter. In Egypt, Lebanon and Saudi Arabia, newspaper cartoons and comedic television programs have long been a platform for caustic political satire, with the special Ramadan broadcast of *Tash ma Tash*, a Saudi television comedy, stirring controversy in Saudi Arabia at the time of this writing.⁽⁵⁾ The connection between politics and entertainment in the developing world sometimes takes indirect forms. In India, the television broadcasts of the historical Hindu epics, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, were concomitant with a changing political landscape, and by some

accounts, to the redefinition of politics in India.(6) In Latin America, telenovelas often take on politicized socio-economic themes.

In most of the non-Western world, cultural production is an arena where various forces struggle to define national identity in ways that are more contentious than in the West. For example, the commoditization of the female body in popular culture, which in the West is often marginally discussed as a moral issue, creates major controversies in the non-Western world, where women's roles are central to historical memory and national identity. In short, the impact of entertainment television on public discourse in developing countries(7) is explained by "popular culture's ability to produce and articulate feelings [that] can become the basis of an identity, and that identity can be the source of political thought and action."(8)

That popular culture creates identities with political potential, or perhaps more accurately, that it integrates already existing group identities and serves as a platform for their exaltation in public discourse, is made clear by the controversy surrounding Arab reality television. Reality television broadcasts are public events in Arab countries, compelling various actors to articulate competing social identities and political agendas in a process of public contention whose objective is to favor one or another vision of the good society.(9) Because of its high visibility, popular culture in general and reality television specifically, is a magnet for contentious politics because the upheaval over its implications for Arab societies stands for a larger, ongoing debate about Arab-Western relations and socio-cultural change. The overlap between popular culture and politics

exposes fault-lines in Arab societies as the popularity and controversial status of reality television brings to the surface latent socio-political tensions.

To illustrate these processes of contention, this article takes three reality television shows as case-studies. The first is *Super Star*, the Arab version of *Pop Idol* or *American Idol*, the second is *Star Academy*, the Arab version of *Fame Academy*, and the third is *Al Ra'is*, the Arabic version of *Big Brother*(10) . The first was produced by Future Television, a Lebanese channel owned by the family of the late Rafiq al-Hariri; the second was launched by the Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation (LBC); the third was broadcast by the Dubai-based, Saudi-owned Middle East Broadcasting Center (MBC). *Superstar* and *Star Academy* were shot in Lebanon, *Al Ra'is* in Bahrain. The first two have been extremely popular among Arab audiences and have garnered record advertising rates, with *Star Academy* being unequivocally the most popular and probably the most controversial satellite television program in Arab history. The third program, *Al Ra'is* was shut down one week after it went on the air in 2004, due to intense controversy including street demonstrations in Manama, Bahrain's capital. Public discourse around these programs illustrates how various groups use them to articulate and legitimate competing ideological agendas. In particular, after exploring the emergence of nationalist speech in tandem with reality television broadcasts, my observations focus on how business and religious leaders, among others, use the visibility of reality television to increase the public's exposure to their views.

Reality Television and Inter-Arab Rivalries

Developments in the Arab media industry during the last 15 years are dominated by a

trend towards regionalization.(11) Nationally oriented terrestrial television channels and national daily newspapers remain popular and influential in some Arab countries, but regional satellite television channels such as Al Jazeera, Al Arabiya, LBC and MBC, and regional newspapers such as *Al Hayat*, *Asharq Al Awsat* and *Al Quds Al Arabi*, all three London-based, have a strong following and usually set the terms and rhythm of Pan-Arab public discourse. Like other regional media industries in Latin America and South East Asia, Arab satellite television tends to produce programs that appeal at once to city dwellers in Baghdad and Casablanca and to rural viewers in the Egyptian *sa'id* and the Lebanese *jurd*, although it is mostly focused on urban middle-class viewers that appeal to advertisers. Additional trends underscoring Arab satellite television's trans-regional mode of address include (1) the development of what is now known as "white Arabic," a media compatible, simplified version of Standard Modern Arabic that is becoming a *lingua franca* for regional public discourse, (2) the advent of stars with regional appeal (whether they are journalists, program hosts, singers, or to a lesser extent, actors) and (3) the standardization of production practices in Beirut, Cairo and Dubai.(12)

At another level, the rising popularity of television formats that Arab channels purchase from the Netherlands and the United Kingdom and then adapt to Arab audiences has brought to Arab screens a flurry of what can be called "hybrid" programs because they combine a "global" format developed in Western Europe or the United States, with "local" content that appeals to the cultural sensibilities of specific audiences. In 2004 and 2005, many media executives in Beirut and Dubai said to me that "the gossip in the [satellite television] industry used to be about who is creating what, and now the gossip is about who is purchasing which format." In my interviews with satellite television

professionals, there were no indications of dissatisfaction with this situation, since in most cases importing program ideas and adapting them is less arduous than creating original programs⁽¹³⁾ Clearly, television format adaptation suits satellite television channels because it allows them to bypass several steps in the production process and to fashion programs for a Pan-Arab audience living between Rabat and Baghdad. The resulting productions mix elements from “East” and “West” and draw on the cultural repertoires of various Arab countries. The cultural hybridity of these programs, and many of them belong to the reality genre, contributes to unpredictable audience reactions and, as we shall see shortly, heated public debates.⁽¹⁴⁾

Regionalization is well established in the Arab satellite television industry as a business and marketing strategy. Many promotion and marketing managers I spoke with in Beirut and Dubai wax lyrical when conjuring up visions of a Pan-Arab audience whose millions of viewers transcend inter-Arab divisions. Politically and culturally, however, regionalization is skin deep, as demonstrated by expressions of rivalry between Arabs from different countries during the 2003 broadcast of Future Television’s *Super Star*. Launched with great success in 2003, this Arabic version of *Pop Idol* raised Future Television’s stature both nationally and regionally as thousands of Arabs auditioned to participate in the program and millions watched and voted for their favorite contestants. *Super Star* rested on the basic premise of singers performing on stage in front of three jurors. Elias al-Rahbani, member of Lebanon’s most famous musical family, donned edgy eyewear and black turtlenecks to play the role of juror-in-chief, a convincing if a bit contrived copycat of Simon Cowell, the acerbic music producer and jury leader in the American version of the show, *American Idol*.⁽¹⁵⁾

As it reached its final weeks, *Super Star's* competition turned from an artistic competition between individual contestants to an international rivalry in which each contender was primarily performing as a representative of their country.(16) From the early weeks of the program, viewers could see the flag waving by the in-studio audience, and text messages feeding into television tickers depicted patriotic statements often accompanied by icons of national flags whose on-screen appearance was made possible by Multimedia Messaging Service. Even before the last couple of weeks when the competition intensified significantly, there were reports that voting was occurring on national bases, which meant that the wealthy inhabitants of the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and United Arab Emirates) would give *Super Star* contestants from those countries an edge in the competition. However, with the presence of the jury, artistic talent was a determining factor,(17) and the three semi-finalists were a Jordanian woman, a Lebanese man and a Syrian man. This combination of nationalities created controversy. When the Lebanese competitor was eliminated in the semi-final, riots broke out in Beirut and fans stormed the stage in protest, as Lebanese converged to the studios in large demonstrations. Fuelling this discontent was a rampant rumor that Syrian political pressure led to the elimination of the Lebanese candidate. Syria, euphemistically dubbed by Western news agencies as Lebanon's "power broker," in fact micro-managed all Lebanese affairs until Syrian troops withdrew from Lebanon in April 2005 under the combined pressure of massive street demonstrations in Beirut and United Nations resolution 1559 co-sponsored by France and the United States. Until the withdrawal, the head of Syrian military intelligence in Lebanon was the *de facto* ruler of the country, and the Lebanese believed

that very little happened in Lebanon without Syrian approval or intervention. It was therefore not surprising that Lebanese viewers were suspicious about the transparency of the process that led to the elimination of their national contestant.

In addition to these complicating issues between Lebanon and Syria, modern Jordanian-Syrian relations have been riddled with tension for various political reasons, including Syrian resentment about the Hashemite monarchy's historically compromising stance towards Israel. The voting frenzy surrounding *Super Star* became a competition between these countries. When *Super Star* fever reached Syria itself, telecommunications companies installed billboards on Damascus thoroughfares promoting the Syrian contestant and exhorting Syrians to perform their national duty and vote for him. In interviews with Western press agencies, Syrians on the street were unequivocal: They were voting for him because he was Syrian. The fact that he was a good performer was just fine, but his national identity was the primary motivation for their participation in the show.(18) Special mobile telephone lines were devoted to the endeavor. In Jordan, rumors spread of a full-fledged national mobilization. King Abdallah himself was reported to have instructed officers in the Jordanian armed forces to issue orders to the soldiers under their command to vote for Diana Carazon, the Jordanian candidate who ultimately was crowned "Superstar of the Arabs." Businesses exploited the situation as a marketing opportunity, with an ice cream parlor offering free ice cream for those who vote for Diana Carazon, and a car dealership took an ad in the daily *Al-Dustour* advertising a 2003 sedan that it would give to Diana Carazon.(19) Jordan's telecommunications companies, who were poised to make large profits from their share of the voting bills,(20) entered the fray, with Fastlink and Mobile Com pledging "full

support” and launching a daily print advertising campaign urging readers to support the Jordanian contestant and vote for her(21) .

Super Star stimulated patriotic feelings among its viewers that were exploited by political leaders and the corporate world. As an Associated Press wire report described it, “Arab ‘Idol’ [was] a Battle of Nations.”(22) This battle was all the more visible because of the enormous Pan-Arab audience that Future Television’s flagship program attracted: More than 30 million viewers watched the finale of *Super Star 1*,(23) and 4.8 million voted, 52 percent for Diana Carazon.(24) The division of passions and votes according to national affiliations undermines claims that Pan-Arab satellite television is uniting Arabs “from the (Atlantic) Ocean the (Persian) Gulf” in one community of feeling. While there are burning issues with transnational appeal, such as the plight of Palestinians and Iraqis under occupation, they appear to cede the way, even if temporarily, to more provincial affirmations of patriotism in the course of voting in popular reality television programs such as *Super Star*.

Unlike *Star Academy* and *Al Ra’is*, *Super Star* did not trigger a major “moral panic.” Rather, it elicited commentary that is clearly political. The Islamic Action Front, a Jordanian political formation with ties to the Muslim Brotherhood, issued a “Press Statement Surrounding the Program *Super Star*,” condemning it for “promoting cultural globalization” and the Americanization of Islamic values, but the debate in Jordan fizzled away as a Jordanian won the competition. In the second installment [*Superstar 2*, 2004], a Palestinian contestant from the West Bank town of Salfit, Ammar Hassan, rose to favorite contestant status, partly to the Arab public’s sympathy for the Palestinians. On

the nights when he performed, the 12,000 residents of Salfit stayed indoors, glued to their screens, and when he rose to the finals against the Libyan Eyman Al-Atar, 2,000 people gathered in a Salfit park to watch together, chanting “Ammar, Ammar, *Super Star!*” In spite of this popularity, Hamas condemned Palestinian reactions to *Super Star* in the following statement:

“Our people are in need of heroes, resistance fighters, and contributors to building the country and are not in need of singers, corruption mongers, and advocates of immorality”(25)

That reactions to *Super Star* are explicitly articulated in political and ideological terms should not obscure the tendency of such public controversies to blur the boundaries between the political, socio-cultural and moral realms. *Super Star's* format itself was acceptable to all but the most radical Islamist interpretations of social behavior, since candidates sang on a stage facing a jury from a relatively significant distance and there was little interaction or physical contact between men and women. This was not the case with other Arab reality television programs, such as *Al Ra'is* or *Star Academy*, where stage proxemics emerged as a key reason for outrage in some quarters of the Arab public. The controversies associated with *Big Brother* and *Star Academy* reveal that these debates are better understood as involving a complex tug-of-war between different contenders rather than a simple binary opposition between morally controversial forms of popular culture and morally strict speakers in the name of Islam.

Reality Television, Business and Religion

It is a well-rehearsed cliché that Islam pervades Arab socio-cultural and political fabrics.

The validity of this proposition suffers from periodic episodes of over-stretch when some observers of the Arab world rely on Islam as an all-encompassing determinant of social relations to the detriment of other factors, the relevance of which may be obscured by religious determinism. The following episode points to the continued emergence of neo-liberal speech in the Arab public sphere, and that even when arguments that claim a basis in Islam win, they increasingly are contested. When the Middle East Broadcasting Center (MBC) interrupted the shooting and broadcasting of *Al Ra'is* only a week after it began in Bahrain in February 2004, virtually all reports on the incident in the press credited—or blamed—Islamic activists.(26) While a demonstration by Islamists against the show did occur, the *Al Ra'is* episode was not a simple chain of cause-and-effect that press renditions suggested. Rather, as we shall discuss shortly, it was a complex issue that triggered debate in the Bahraini parliament and involved arguments counter to those of the Islamists.(27)

The upheaval surrounding *Al Ra'is* illustrates that business interests have become powerful enough to contest ostensibly religious arguments in public debate in countries of the Arabian Gulf. According to press reports, the death of *Al Ra'is* was primarily caused by a kiss—literally, a kiss of death—between Abdel Hakim, a young Saudi man, and Kawthar, a young Tunisian woman. By this account, the live broadcast of a kiss triggered active and vocal objections to the program, including a demonstration in Bahrain's capital Manama that, according to witnesses I interviewed, included a couple of hundred men. According to Islamist leaders, their main criticism was grounded in religious morality. A conservative member of the Bahraini Parliament, Sheikh Adel al-

Mawda, said of *Al Ra'is*, "This program showed an abnormal way of living, which is totally opposed to our thoughts, culture, everything ... It is not reality TV at all, especially in our part of the world." (28) This and other similar statements suggest that the claims made on reality television programs that they represent "reality" are contentious in themselves. (29) The dispute around whether reality television does or does not represent reality, which I am exploring in a different essay, suggests that notions of representation, specifically representations of "Arab society" or "Islamic society," are being contested publicly.

So far, the story seems to follow a familiar script: Islamic cleric opposes popular culture that reflects Western values; in turn, religious "traditional" society bows to religious edicts. However, the complexity of the *Al Ra'is* episode comes to view when we consider that members of the Bahraini parliament rose in defense of the program, and especially when we examine the arguments they used. Defenders of *Al Ra'is* publicly argued that the program would boost tourism to Bahrain and therefore contribute to economic growth. (30) In a small country with dwindling energy reserves whose rulers are betting its future prosperity on its status as a financial hub and the world's leading center for Islamic finance, arguments couched in the language of economic pragmatism appeal to a section of the elite whose members feel enough self-confidence to articulate publicly a discourse that contests and offers an alternative to the Islamists. According to the daily *The Bahrain Times*, a special parliamentary committee discussed the impact of *Al Ra'is* on Bahraini society and considered "ways to protect investments and preserve Bahrain's Islamic ethics." (31) The article then quoted the head of the committee, Member of Parliament Ahmed Ibrahim Bahzad, whose words reflect that the debate went beyond an

opposition of Islamists to the culture industry:

There are three distinct opinions about *Big Brother*, and they reflect the vivacity of our society ...

There are people who reject the program completely; the second section does not show any interest in the issue, while the third group says that the focus should not be on the program but on the participants ... There are people who want to cancel the contract with the producing companies, but this is opposed by the businessmen who fear that such a decision would hurt Bahrain's reputation and undermine potential investment agreements.(32)

In the Arab context, references to “national reputation” arise in the context of government suppression of political dissent or, less frequently, sexual content. It is frequently used against journalists critical of government policies. Invoking the trope of national reputation in reference to Bahrain's fitness for investment suggests a shift in Arab public discourse towards neo-liberal governance. This is echoed in appeals to government efficiency and responsiveness to the practical needs of citizens. In their opposition to the shutdown of *Al Ra'is*, “liberal” Bahraini politicians countered the Islamists with socio-economic arguments. Thus another member of Bahrain's parliament, Abdullah al Dossary, argued that “[T]here are other important issues to be tackled by the deputies. Why all the fuss over a TV show? What happened to the citizens' problems such as housing, salary improvement and education?”(33) This attention to the every-day life concerns of the citizenry, with bigger economic arguments in the background, indicate that a purely “culturalist,” in this case Islamist, explanation of public debates about the impact of reality television provides us with a partial understanding of an overall picture in which non-religious forces contend with speakers in the name of Islam.(34)

The official explanation that came out of the Middle East Broadcasting Center itself suggests that religion was not the dominant factor in their decision, or at least that MBC management claims other reasons. Even after deciding to cancel *Al Ra'is*, MBC argued that the program “was more realistic in reflecting the reality” of Arab youth than other reality television programs, adding a business explanation to the controversy:

All new products need time to be accepted. In certain cases, they can be wrongly interpreted ... By this sacrifice, MBC does not want to risk, through its programs and broadcasting, being accused of harming Arab traditions and values, because it considers the channel one for the Arab family.(35)

This corporate statement reflects the importance of business considerations in MBC’s decision to shut down the program. Its “family channel” brand risks losing its luster if it keeps a program on the air that a probably small but nonetheless vocal minority considered contrary to “family values.” The mention of “sacrifice” finds its explanation in the official MBC statement declaring a loss of \$6 million because of the shutdown of *Al Ra'is*, an enormous amount by regional standards, although the real figure is hard to know. The invocation of “Arab traditions and values” is itself significant in that Islam as such is not mentioned in the statement, in spite of the fact that opposition to the program was mainly under the banner of its putative violation of Islamic values.

One aspect of the *Al Ra'is* episode is grounded in one Islamic interpretation of gender relations, which considers *haram*, or prohibited, the unsupervised social mixing of men and women unmarried to each other, or *ikhtilat*. Objections to the program, even though they were not always explicitly articulated as such, focused on the fact that unmarried men and women lived together in one house, creating potential for flirting, physical

contact, and even sexual intercourse that are considered illicit in some of the stricter interpretations of Islamic texts. Bahrain being part of the more socially and religiously conservative Gulf countries, although less conservative than Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, it is not surprising that controversy erupted there over *Al Ra'is*. As we will see shortly, producers could get away shooting a similar show in Lebanon, where *Star Academy* was soon to become a regionally unprecedented popular and commercial success story. As an American reporter quipped:

Neither of the first two shows [*Al-Hawa Sawa*(36) and *Star Academy*] generated quite the horror of 'Big Brother,' in part because they were broadcast from Lebanon, which much of the Arab world considers depraved anyway. Lebanon's satellite networks already have a reputation for showing female employees on air with minimal wardrobes.(37)

The remaining section of this article discusses how criticism of interactions between men and women was at the center of the controversy surrounding *Star Academy*.

Reality Television and Gender Relations

If *Super Star* showed popular culture as a site of resurgent nationalisms and inter-Arab rivalries, and if *Al Ra'is* exposes the vulnerability of the Arab satellite television industry, *Star Academy* demonstrates that a television program can become a highly controversial public event that not only survives its numerous critics but at the same time saturates Pan-Arab public discourse, becoming a full-fledged media event.

The Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation's *Star Academy* is the Arabic version of an original format owned by the Dutch format-house Endemol, which became familiar to

some Lebanese viewers through the 2002 French version by the French broadcaster TF1.(38) Contestants in the first installment of *Star Academy* (2003-2004), or, as they were officially called, “the students,” hailed from Egypt, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries.(39) The students took lessons in oral interpretation, dancing, singing, music, fashion, hair-styling, and make-up. Every week, the teachers designated two “nominees,” (the English word was used), and after a live Friday night show performed by the students, the audience was asked to vote for the nominee who they wanted to remain on the show. The other nominee was in effect voted out of The Academy, the four-story building near LBC headquarters in Adma, Lebanon. LBC management devoted regionally unprecedented resources for the program, starting with a vast Pan-Arab recruitment campaign that whittled 3,000 applicants to 16 finalists and a prominent programming schedule, including nightly one hour “access” shows, a weekly two-hour Friday “prime,” and a 24-hour satellite channel airing feeds from the 60 cameras in The Academy’s building.(40) Several LBC executives, including the network’s general manager Pierre al-Daher, indicated that *Star Academy* was considered their flagship program and given marketing, promotion, production and programming resources commensurate with this status.(41)

Star Academy was an instant hit. Arabs young and old, men and women, rich and poor, were enthralled for 18 weeks between December 2003 and April 2004.(42) During daily access shows, the streets of Beirut, Riyadh and Rabat emptied out and restaurant owners complained that *Star Academy* was killing their business during the lucrative dinner hours. The fever reached its highest pitch on Friday night during the “prime” when “the students” performed, including the two nominees, one of whom would be voted out at the

end of the broadcast. Arab youth created fan sites on the Internet, including discussion boards where writers declared their undying love to Bruno, the Lebanese contestant, and Sophia, the Moroccan participant, who for a while emerged as the favorite heartthrob and sex-symbol, respectively. Rumors spread of a love affair between Sophia and Bashar from Kuwait. The highly popular satellite television music channels such as Rotana, Saudi-owned and Lebanon-based, and Melody Hits, which is Egyptian-owned and based, displayed a flow of love-and-hate messages sent via mobile phone text messages that appeared on moving tickers at the bottom of the television screen.(43) Women's daytime talk-shows and men's public affairs programs discussed the phenomenon. According to market research companies, *Star Academy* grabbed 80 percent of the 15 to 25 audience in Lebanon, and after a few weeks captured record audiences in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries.(44)

Star Academy was as controversial as it was popular. Clerics and politicians from Morocco to Iraq condemned it; electronic diatribes swirled against it in cyberspace. In the wake of the transformation of Bashar al-Shatti, a Kuwaiti contestant and penultimate finalist, into a Pan-Arab heartthrob, and after a concert in Kuwait by *Star Academy* finalists, the Dean of the School of Islamic Law and *Shari'a* at Kuwait University issued a religious opinion (*fatwa*) condemning it. The Kuwaiti parliament discussed legislation to "protect morality" from *Star Academy*, and Islamist members of Parliament grilled the Minister of Information and pressured him to resign for allowing the broadcasts.(45) A Saudi columnist in the establishment daily *Al Riyadh* called *Star Academy* "a whorehouse," using epithets rarely printed in the Saudi press, while an audio cassette tape, titled "The Academy of the Devil" and carrying fiery sermons, was distributed by

religious activists in Saudi Arabia.(46) Religious leaders were inundated with requests for rulings on whether it was *haram* or *halal* to watch and participate in the show. A Sunni cleric from Lebanon claimed that the devil was present in the program. In what amounted to a rare dissenting youth voice in a cyberspace, where young people were overwhelmingly enamored with the show, an Islamist youth group set up a website called No2StarAcademy.net.(47) As mentioned earlier, a political party in Jordan close to the Muslim Brotherhood issued an official statement against reality TV, accusing it of promoting American interests and facilitating cultural globalization. Perhaps more importantly, the venerable and official “Permanent Committee for Scientific Research and the Issuing of Fatwas” in Saudi Arabia issued a lengthy fatwa, replete with citations from the *Koran* and *Hadith*, prohibiting watching, discussing, voting in or participating in *Star Academy*.(48)

The controversy surrounding *Star Academy* persisted and evolved into a highly public debate about a variety of hot-button issues having to do with modernity and tradition, social change and cultural identity. The program was not banned; rather it continued, perhaps predictably, to grow in popularity. Talk-shows invited clerics, psychologists and media professionals to debate the show’s popularity and impact. The pages of the Pan-Arab press echoed with praise or condemnation, or with comparisons between voting procedures in *Star Academy* and governance and elections in Arab countries. The Internet buzzed with discussion boards. During the second two months of the first *Star Academy* [March and April 2004] *Star Academy* was invoked on television talk-shows and in newspaper columns as a code word for contentious issues such as Arab-Western relations, the status of women and youth, and elections. In effect, *Star Academy* was

appropriated as what I call *an idiom of contention*, with important implications for the overlap between popular culture and politics discussed below.

Reality Television and Public Contention

The political implications of transnational Arab reality television rest to a large extent in the way that it draws out into the public sphere competing arguments about politics, economics, culture, religion and the myriad interconnections between the four. In that respect, reality television activates processes of public contention at the regional, Pan-Arab level that nonetheless take distinct shapes in the various national spheres in which they unfold. As we already have seen, *Superstar* activated patriotic feelings that were manifest in nationalistic rivalries.(49) The debate over *Al Ra'is* in Bahrain took the shape of a struggle between Islamic interpretations of the good society and business considerations of national reputation.(50) The controversy over *Star Academy*, while taking a Pan-Arab character, was also articulated to issues that were specific to individual countries. Thus the impassioned debate about *Star Academy 1* in Kuwait cannot be disassociated from the struggle for women's political rights that was at a high pitch when a Kuwaiti contestant in *Star Academy* was rising to the finale. Opponents to *Star Academy* and to Kuwait women's political rights were the same: The Islamists led by MP Walid al-Tabtaba'i. In both cases, Islamists "lost," with Kuwaiti women winning political rights in 2005 and *Star Academy* broadcasts continuing into Kuwait.(51) In Lebanon, even on the screen of LBC itself, discussions about the role of the media (educational or commercial?), the role of media policy (*dirigiste* or *laisser-faire?*), and the role of parents

(to prohibit their children from watching *Star Academy* or to watch it with them?), were all conducted in the context of the *Star Academy* controversy.(52)

Public contention involves making public claims over courses of collective action, articulated as putative social values, in order to change or maintain the status quo. Public contention is therefore a politically invested rhetorical space. Because of its resounding success with Arab audiences, reality television is a magnet for contentious politics, drawing contenders with conflicting ideologies and asymmetrical symbolic resources, who use the introduction of reality television and the debate surrounding it in order to advance their agendas by attempting to redraw the boundaries of Arab public discourse. The re-definition of “national reputation,” from a notion connoting “political unity and the absence of dissent” to one meaning “readiness for foreign investment,” suggests that boundaries are being redrawn. But whether reality television, ostensibly a harbinger of “modern” political values and behaviors such as voting and public debate, affects social change that ultimately contributes to the democratization of Arab politics is an issue that can only be determined with the benefit of historical hindsight and sustained empirical research. At the moment, however, some political implications of Arab reality television can be discerned in the programs discussed in this article.

Star Academy is, in many ways, a political program. It is political first in the sense advanced by the “alternative future” explanation of the show’s popularity, in that it stages an apparently fair competition whose participants count on their personal initiative, creativity and skills, and whose winners are determined by a popular vote. This “reality” is discordant with that of most young Arabs, who are prevented from expressing their

opinions, who get their jobs because of connections and rarely because of competence, and where power is wielded arbitrarily by unelected rulers and officials. In that sense, according to this perspective, reality television is the harbinger of an alternative future.(53) The theme song of the program, *Jayee al Haqiqa* (Truth is on the Way), an Arabic version of *Let the Sunshine In*, from the soundtrack of the movie *Hair*, is directly political, both in its lyrics, which decry a situation of falsity that the forthcoming truth will expose, and visuals expressed in the music video.(54)

The music video, directed by leading Lebanese director Nadine Labaki and produced by Lebanese production house Talkies under the EMI label, appears to confirm the song's political tenor. Shot with a blue filter, the video features the *Star Academy* contestants marching through streets, waving the flags of their respective countries: The Lebanese flag with the cedar between two red bands, the Tunisian with its white crescent and star on red background, the Saudi with its white sword and Islamic script on green background. The video clearly connotes a youth political protest march, brandishing their fists, waving flags, expressing discontent with their situation and invoking an alternative reality dominated by truth, warmth and light.(55) Had *Star Academy* not achieved enormous popularity, its content would not have articulated Arab social, political and economic reality. Its huge following, however, made it profoundly political.

Major events can inject an extra dose of politics into reality television programs. When a car bomb killed Lebanon's ex-Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri in Beirut on February 14, 2005, both *Super Star* and *Star Academy* became overtly political. The former stopped regular broadcasts and auditions for the next year's installment, and participants in

several installments of the show released what became known as “patriotic songs,” broadcast around the clock by Future Television. The Hariri-owned channel was transformed into a full-time media machine to glorify the martyr, help his son Saad Eddin’s coalition to win a majority of Lebanese parliamentary seats in the 2005 legislative elections, and maintain public pressure to get to “the Truth” about the assassination of its founding owner.

Star Academy 2’s producers also strategically drew on al-Hariri’s assassination. Roula Saad, director of Promotion and Marketing at LBC, who doubles as the director of “The Academy,” curtly announced on the air: “Mr. Hariri is dead. Lebanon is mourning.” The brevity ostensibly was intended to allow the “students” to “stay focused” on the competition.⁽⁵⁶⁾ After a hiatus of 10 days of mourning, however, LBC resumed *Star Academy* with a “prime” on Friday, January 25, 2005, which turned into a nationalistic fest with patriotic songs performed participants in *Star Academy 1* and 2, and ended with the voting out of the Syrian contestant Joey.⁽⁵⁷⁾ Several newspapers commented on the political connotations of that prime in a context where Syria was held responsible for Hariri’s death, a suspicion which subsequently was formalized in the report issued in October 2005 by a United Nations investigative team headed by German judge Detlev Mehlis.

Conclusions

The various television programs discussed in this article and public discourse around them suggests that *Star Academy* and its competitors are having an impact on Arab public discourse and politics. But whether these overlaps between popular culture and politics

justify the argument that reality television is “the best hope for democracy in the Arab world” remains to be established.(58) The empirical investigation of the links between reality television and democracy requires a strict operational definition of “democracy” that falls outside of the scope of this article. It is an issue in need of further research with the combined benefits of empirical depth and historical distance. In the meantime, we can conclude this article with a few observations that can be used as guidelines or at least as discussion points as research on this topic advances.

First, a conceptual distinction must be made between “democracy of participation” and “democracy of governance.” The former is a prerequisite to the latter, but not a substitute. Reality television activates the former, but it is so far doubtful that it will lead to the latter. Even in the case of the demonstrations that followed the assassination of Rafiq al-Hariri and forced the resignation of then Lebanese Prime Minister Omar Karami, some social uses of technology compelled by reality television (using mobile phones for mobilizing and voting, etc.) played a role, but how decisive of a role is something that remains to be explored. That viewers learn to use their mobile phones to vote and even forge alliances is potentially significant, but many other conditions, including functioning institutions, accountability mechanisms, etc.—some that have nothing to do with television—have to be realized before this leads to sustainable change that expands the avenues of inclusion and participation in political processes. That viewers use their mobile phones to vote for their favorite *Super Star* contestant does not necessarily turn them into activists for democratic participation *and* governance.

Second, to the extent that voting via mobile phones is a major source of profit for both mobile phone providers and television channels, reality television poses a flagrant conflict between economic and political interests. Even though telecommunications and television executives are prohibited by non-disclosure agreements from revealing the number of calls made during reality television voting, it is well known in both industries that a relatively small number of voters are behind a relatively large volume of votes.(59) Those with high incomes can vote a theoretically infinite number of times, which means that the one-person, one-vote principle at the heart of democratic practice is trampled over, and that wealthy people have more voting power than others. This could skew results of all Arab reality shows in favor of the wealthy Gulf countries, especially given that, as explained earlier, a nationalistic streak is evident in voting patterns.

Third, Arab media are controlled by the same business-political elite whose interest in profit is inversely proportional to their interest in political change, which would strip from them some of the privileges they otherwise would not have if Arab countries were to develop more transparent governance procedures. It is unlikely that the son-in-law of the Saudi king would allow the television network he owns to proceed with shows that contribute, even rhetorically and no matter how indirectly, to undermine the power structure in Saudi Arabia, just as it is improbable that the owners of a Lebanese television channel would allow expression of political dissent that may end up stripping some of the privileges that the business elite received from its patronage of the political class.(60)

Fourth, out of the three programs discussed in this article, the two that survived controversy were produced in and broadcast from Lebanon, probably the most “liberal”

and “Western-oriented” of all Arab countries. Concepts and language from reality television were present in the demonstrations following the assassination of al-Hariri, which did lead to the resignation of a sitting Prime Minister (Omar Karami), a rare occurrence in Arab politics. However, had Hariri been a “regular” Arab politician, without a global business empire and personal friendships with heads of state, and/or had the United States and France not decided to collaborate on passing UN 1559 in the Security Council, would the demonstrations have occurred or lasted as they long as they did last? Also, the extent to which these events will have an enduring impact on Lebanese politics, and whether similar events could occur in other Arab countries, are issues that have yet to be explored.

The political slogans of activists in the Arab world reflect a media-savvy generation mindful of the advantages of encapsulating a political agenda in one word: *Kifaya*, or “enough,” for political activist attempting to end Mubarak’s long reign in Egypt; *Al-‘An*, or “now,” for Kuwaiti women unwilling to wait longer to obtain their political rights; *Al Haqiqa*, or “the Truth,” for Lebanese demonstrators pressing for the truth about the perpetrators of the bombing that ended Hariri’s life. The laconic style of these political campaigns does reflect, to some extent, the concise vocabulary of reality television (“nominee,” “prime,” etc). It also is compatible with news media routines based on the visual snapshot and the sound bite. In an age of the 24-hour news cycle, when Arabs are being subjected to a combination of American plans to re-shape the Middle East, activists understand and exploit the fact that a television camera can protect them, at least temporarily, from harassment by the *mukhabarat* (intelligence services) and assorted

state apparatuses. However, more research is needed to understand the scope, depth and impact of these new information dynamics.

Fifth, analysts of the putative political implications of Arab reality television may have a lesson to learn from the experience of media scholars, who went through a period characterized by excessive optimism in the ability of viewers to “empower” themselves by “subverting” media messages. Such scholars now eschew the excesses of “active audience” theory.⁽⁶¹⁾ Television viewers, Web surfers and mobile phone users, prodded by reality television, participate in television shows and express their opinions on the tickers of television screens and on fan sites and discussion groups. They are indeed active and creative in how they conduct these activities, but whether this leads to a significant and sustainable opening at the political level, and whether participation in reality shows leads to long-term civic or political participation that in turn leads to *systemic and sustainable* changes in Arab governance, remains to be seen.

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NOTES

1. The boundaries of the reality television genre are notoriously porous. In this article the moniker “reality television” refers to programs that have defined themselves as “reality television,” which applies more to *Star Academy* and *Al Ra’is* than to *Super Star*.

However, the latter was included in discussions of reality television in Arab public discourse, and therefore in this study.

2. Because of space considerations, it is impossible to include verbatim material from the interviews and detailed textual analyses in this chapter, which will have to await the book-length treatment.

3. Marwan M. Kraidy, *Screens of Contention: Arab Media and the Challenges of Modernity*, book manuscript in progress.

4. Neil Gabler, *Life the Movie: How Entertainment Conquered Everyday Life* (New York, 1998).

5. *Tash ma Tash* is produced privately for Saudi TV, but was broadcast by MBC during the 2005 Ramadan season. Other controversial Ramadan programs include *Al Hawr Al-Ayn*, a Syrian dramatic series broaching the phenomenon of terrorism in Arab societies, also broadcast by MBC, which generated heated debate from the mainstream Saudi press to radical Islamist internet fora.

6. Arvind Rajagopal, *Politics after Television: Hindu Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Public in India* (Cambridge, 2001)

7. For discussions of this issue in various regions of the world see Nestor García-Canclini, *Consumers and Citizens: Globalization and Multicultural Conflicts* (Minneapolis, 2001) and Jesus Martín-Barbero, *From the Media to Mediations: Communication, Culture and Hegemony* (London, 1993) for Latin American; for India, Walter Armbrust, *Mass Culture and Modernism in Egypt* (Cambridge, 1996) and Lila-Abu Lughod, *Dramas of Nationhood: The Politics of Television in Egypt* (Chicago, 2005), for Egypt; Marwan M. Kraidy, *Hybridity, or the Cultural Logic of Globalization* (Philadelphia, 2005), pp 116-147, for Lebanon, and Patrick D. Murphy and Marwan M. Kraidy, *Global Media Studies: Ethnographic Perspectives* (London, 2003) for various other regions and countries, including Lebanon and Mexico.
8. John Street, *Politics and Popular Culture*, (Philadelphia, 1997), p. 10. Also, the globalization of American political campaigning and electioneering practices, with their heavy reliance on television, should also be mentioned as a factor tightening the connections between politics and popular culture worldwide.
9. “Visions of the good society” include an Islamist order based on the life of the *salaf*, or ancestors from the early days of Islam, and the freedom to make money for media corporations.
10. The Arabic name adds another layer to the Orwellian connotation of the name Big Brother, since *Al-Ra'is* means “president” or “leader” in Arabic, and has the same root with the word *ra's*, Arabic for “head.”
11. For more on the regionalization of Arab media, see Jon Alterman (1998) *New Media, New Politics?* (Washington, DC), Marwan M. Kraidy (2002). Arab Satellite Television Between Globalization and Regionalization, *Global Media Journal*, 1, 1, Naomi Sakr,

Satellite Realms: Transnational Television, Globalization and the Middle East (London, 2002), and Marwan M. Kraidy and Joe F. Khalil (2006, forthcoming), "Current Trends in the Arab Television Industry," in *Media Globe: Trends in International Media*, Y. Kamalipour and L. Artz (Eds.), Lanham, MD, Rowman and Littlefield.

12. Made possible by satellite technology, this regionalization is driven by economic calculations. In news, regionalization has created an "anywhere but here" trend whereby satellite television channels tend to criticize all governments, politicians, etc, except those from the country in which they are based. It is well known, for example, that Al Jazeera's editorial line, which is critical of Arab governments, rarely raises questions about Qatari affairs, especially government performance. However, Al Jazeera's relentless criticism of Saudi Arabia's rulers creates a kind of "asymmetrical interdependence" between Qatar and Saudi Arabia by giving more influence to the former. In that context, the creation of Al Arabiya by the Saudis aims at restoring the asymmetry to its fullness between Qatar and Saudi Arabia by undermining Al Jazeera's influence. For a detailed discussion of these issues, see Marwan M. Kraidy and Joe F. Khalil (2006, forthcoming), "Current Trends in the Arab Television Industry," in *Media Globe: Trends in International Media*, Y. Kamalipour and L. Artz (Eds.), Lanham, MD, Rowman and Littlefield.

13. The logistical complexities inherent in reality television programs has led to the rise of the position of "executive producer" in Arab television to supervise all the "story producers" and other "producers" whose task focuses on a single aspect of a reality show. For this insight I am indebted to Joe Khalil, who was recently creative director for a reality television program at MBC in Dubai.

14. For a detailed discussion of hybrid media programs, see Marwan M. Kraidy,

Hybridity, or, the Cultural Logic of Globalization (Philadelphia, 2005), pp 97-115.

15. The discussion will refer mostly to the first installment of *Super Star* in 2003, later dubbed *Superstar 1* in light of newer seasons of the program. When subsequent installment are discussed, they are referred to as *Super Star 2* or *Super Star 3*. Simon Cowell is the acerbic leader of the panel of judges in *American Idol*, the US version of the same program.

16. Among other reports on this issue, see Bassem Mroue, "Arab world's version of *American Idol* has nationalistic bent"

17. I discovered that there is a consensus among media professionals and journalistic critics of television that *Super Star* featured "real voices," while *Star Academy* featured contestants with flamboyant or camera-friendly personalities, but with lower-caliber voices. Press commentary expresses the same consensus.

18. "Arab Idol a Battle of Nations," Beirut, Associated Press, 18 August 2003. For a more detailed treatment of how *Super Star* was received in Syria, see Tyler MacKenzie, "The Best Hope for Democracy in the Arab World: a Crooning TV 'Idol'?" *Transnational Broadcasting Studies* (13), 2004.

19. "Arab Idol a Battle of Nations," Beirut, Associated Press, 18 August 2003.

20. In order to vote, viewers call "toll" numbers, with a charge several times higher than the price of a normal phone call. Profits are divided according to pre-set agreements between television channels and telecommunications companies.

21. "Pan-Arab song contest fuels passions in Jordan," 17 August 2003, *Jordan Times*.

22. *Idol a Battle of Nations*, Beirut, Associated Press, 18 August 2003.

23. Maalouf, Lynn (2004, January 14). "Western television craze makes assured debut on

region's networks," *Daily Star*.

24. Abou Nasr, Maya (2004, 4 February). "Who wants to be a Superstar? 12,000 do," *Daily Star*. According to the same source, the fever carried through into the next season: Responding to casting calls on the screens of Future Television, 60,000 people applied and 40,000 auditioned for *Super Star 2*.

25. Habeas, Abed, "Palestinian singing finalist tunes into nationalism," Associated Press/ Boston Globe, 23 August 2004

26. These include Western press reports and newspaper articles throughout the Arab world.

27. MBC staff—from management to the producers and directors involved in *Al Ra'is*—were reluctant to discuss the issue during personal interviews I conducted in Dubai in 2004 and 2005. However, information gleaned in fieldwork leads me to believe that there were factors internal to MBC that contributed to the controversy, to be discussed in the book-length treatment. Other factors to be explored in the larger study could include ever-present tensions between the majority Shiis and ruling Sunnis in Bahrain.

28. MacFarqhar, Neil, "A kiss is not just a kiss to an angry Arab TV audience," *The New York Times*, 5 March 2004.

29. Reality television's claim to be "real" is an issue that has received significant scholarly attention, for example in Mark Andrejevic, *Reality TV: The Work of Being Watched* (Lanham, MD, 2004) and Annette Hill, *Reality TV: Audiences and Popular Factual Television* (London, 2005). In my ongoing book project mentioned in the first note, I argue that this issue is even more important in the Arab context where defining social reality is a highly contentious matter as it is at the heart of issues of cultural and

religious authenticity and Arab and Islamic relations with the Western world.

30. MacFarqhar, Neil, "A kiss is not just a kiss to an angry Arab TV audience," *The New York Times*, 5 March 2004.

31. "The reality of Reality TV in the Middle East," www.albawaba.com/news/printArticle.php3?sid=271966&lang=e, 7 March 2004.

32. "The reality of Reality TV in the Middle East," www.albawaba.com/news/printArticle.php3?sid=271966&lang=e, 7 March 2004.

33. "The reality of Reality TV in the Middle East," www.albawaba.com/news/printArticle.php3?sid=271966&lang=e, 7 March 2004.

34. The socio-economic arguments could be described as "emergent" while Islamist claims can be said to be "established," a distinction admittedly in need of elaboration. While in this case the show was canceled, the fact that Gulf Arab politicians opposed public claims that shroud themselves in religion is significant, as is MBC's rhetorical gesture to use "Arab" as "opposed" to "Islamic" in its corporate statement, even when there is connotative overlap between the two adjectives.

35. "The reality of Reality TV in the Middle East," www.albawaba.com/news/printArticle.php3?sid=271966&lang=e, 7 March 2004.

36. *Al Hawa Sawa* was a match-making program produced by Arab Radio and Television (ART) in which 8 single women competed for a marriage proposal. The program was shot in Lebanon.

37. MacFarqhar, Neil, "A kiss is not just a kiss to an angry Arab TV audience," *The New York Times*, 5 March 2004. *Al-Hawa Sawa*, an Arab reality television pioneer, featured a group of unmarried women competing for a husband.

38. Because a large section of the Lebanese population is Francophone and some of it Francophile, the low-cost pirate cable operations offer a variety of French channel as part of their line-up.

39. While the discussion moves between *Star Academy 1* (2003-2004) and *Star Academy 2* (2004-2005), the first installment was a greater Pan-Arab media event, but the latter was more explicitly politicized in the wake of Hariri's assassination.

40. Personal interview with Roula Saad, Director of Promotion, Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation, Adma, Lebanon, 5 July 2005.

41. In addition to LBC boss Pierre al-Daher, whom I interviewed on July 5, 2005 and August 21, 2005, and Director of Promotion Roula Saad (5 July 2005), these include Sebouh Alavanthian (5 July 2005), director of the programming department, and Ronny Jazzar, president of *Star Wave*, an LBC affiliated production and promotion house (mid-July 2005).

42. Personal interviews I conducted with audience researchers at IPSOS-STAT OMD and PARC in Dubai and Beirut, June 2004 and June 2005, confirm what Sebouh Alavanthian, Director of the Programming Department at LBC, claimed: that *Star Academy* was successful with all demographic segments, although it particularly drew young viewers.

43. The overwhelming majority of text messages come from countries in the Gulf Cooperation Council, mostly from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates, which suggests a positive link between income levels and volume of text-messages.

44. Personal interviews conducted by the author with audience researchers at IPSOS-STAT OMD and PARC in Dubai and Beirut, June 2004 and June 2005.

45. The Kuwaiti information minister did lose his job in March 2005, in a cabinet

reshuffle triggered by (among other factors) the powerful Islamic bloc in parliament wanted him out, and the new Minister stated he will reactivate a “unit” at the Ministry to “monitor” music videos and reality TV shows for offensive content. It is useful that Kuwait was then witnessing the peak of the struggle for women’s political rights, which mobilized the Islamist political constituency.

46. Al-Dakhil, Mounira Mohammad, “Destructive Academy is Harmful to the Family,” *al-Riyadh*, 27 February 2005.

47. This site was very active during the first season of *Star Academy* but has since then been taken off the World Wide Web.

48. While the Permanent Committee has issued opinion about mass media issues in the past, this is to my knowledge the first time that an entire *fatwa* is devoted to a single television program.

49. Technical developments such as Multimedia Messaging System (MMS) have encouraged national identification by inserting on the television ticker, a coloured flag of the country from which the call was made.

50. Interviews with five media professionals involved in the program indicate that there are other factors having to do with the interlocking media and political elites in Saudi Arabia, but these sources requested anonymity and asked that this issue not be discussed in detail at this time.

51. In a compromise with the Islamists, *Star Academy 2* finalists did not give a concert in Kuwait. The concert given by *Star Academy 1* finalists in Kuwait was the lightning rod of the Islamists. Some might also say that the law giving Kuwait women their political rights compromised with the Islamists when it stipulated that women’s political

participation was to be framed by vaguely mentioned “Islamic principles.”

52. See for instance, the 7 March 2004, episode of the news show *Al-Hadath*, in which a Saudi journalist, a Lebanese advertising executive, a Lebanese psychoanalyst and LBC’s Director of Promotion and Marketing, debated the program, interspersed with reports about the reception of *Star Academy* in various Arab countries.

53. There were many articles in the Western and Arab press presenting this argument, the latest being Carla Power, “Look Who’s Talking,” *Newsweek International*, 8 August 2005, pp 50-51. While this argument is worth considering, we should certainly be cautious not to exaggerate the democratizing impact of reality television, or at least give some time for systematic research on the topic before we make optimistic claims.

54. Again, caution is advisable in evaluating the political impact of this video clip, in distinction from its political connotations.

55. In hindsight, the visuals of the video clip bear an uncanny resemblance to the Beirut demonstrations in the spring of 2005, with the exception that in the video clip many Arab flags were waived while in Beirut all flags were Lebanese.

56. Various news stories in the Lebanese and Pan-Arab press in the second half of February 2005, including *Annahar*, *Assafir* and *Al-Hayat*.

57. At that time tensions between Syria and Lebanon reached their peak since the early 1990s, as there was a widespread suspicion that Syria contributed one way or another to al-Hariri’s death. What occurred on the *Star Academy 2* stage reflected popular discontent with Syria in Lebanon. Contrary to the clapping and dancing that usually accompanies the exit of a losing contestant, the amphitheater where the primes are shot was fully silent as the Syrian contestant stepped out.

58. I am referring here to Tyler MacKenzie, The Best Hope for Democracy in the Arab World: a Crooning TV "Idol"? *Transnational Broadcasting Studies* (13), 2004.

59. The amount of profit derived from voting is the best-guarded secret in the industry, and even journalists who cover the media offer informed speculation. Everyone I interviewed however agrees that significant profits are made from voting, and that in some cases they exceed advertising revenues.

60. " In Saudi Arabia and Lebanon, as in most other Arab countries, the media elite interlocks with the political elite, either through business or family relations."

61. A detailed discussion of the many ebbs and flows of this debate can be found in Patrick D. Murphy and Marwan M. Kraidy, Editors (2003). *Global Media Studies: Ethnographic Perspectives*. London: Routledge.