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Abstract

Drawn from a bigger project (Kraidy, 2009, in press), this article examines the heated debate triggered by the pan-Arab reality show Star Academy in Saudi Arabia. It examines how controversies over authenticity spawned by popular culture crystallize broader social and political struggles. The article focuses on Star Academy as a contentious media event, describing and analyzing various Saudi reactions to Star Academy, and zeroing in on what the controversy reveals about Saudi politics. The article concludes that Star Academy was so polemical in Saudi Arabia because the show subverted the religious bases of Saudi social order by promoting women's agency, featuring cultural hybridity and individuating authenticity.

Disciplines

Communication

Reality Television, Gender, and Authenticity in Saudi Arabia

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Drawn from a bigger project (Kraidy, 2009, in press), this article examines the heated debate triggered by the pan-Arab reality show Star Academy in Saudi Arabia. It examines how controversies over authenticity spawned by popular culture crystallize broader social and political struggles. The article focuses on Star Academy as a contentious media event, describing and analyzing various Saudi reactions to Star Academy, and zeroing in on what the controversy reveals about Saudi politics. The article concludes that Star Academy was so polemical in Saudi Arabia because the show subverted the religious bases of Saudi social order by promoting women's agency, featuring cultural hybridity and individuating authenticity.

“The great struggles in the Arab world today,” wrote the Moroccan feminist sociologist Fatima Mernissi, “concern [the] attitude towards Western symbolic capital, in particular the fight for authenticity (*al-asala*), which now figures prominently in all current debates, whether these be political, social, or economic” (Mernissi, 1987, p. 83). In that context, *Star Academy*, a popular Arabic-language reality show broadcast by the Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation (LBC) via satellite from Lebanon since December 2003, provoked an intense controversy in Saudi Arabia. Institutions, clerics, royals, journalists, intellectuals, conservative militants, and liberal activists in the kingdom entered the fray by issuing religious rulings, enacting policies, writing newspaper columns, submitting letters to the editor, or appearing on talk-shows. Although various social and political issues were at stake, the controversy revolved around the notion of authenticity.

Drawn from a bigger project (Kraidy, in press), this article examines the heated debate triggered by *Star Academy* in Saudi Arabia. Following Mernissi's insight, it examines how controversies over authenticity spawned by popular culture crystallize broader social and political struggles. After a brief explanation of Saudi politics, the Lebanese factor in pan-Arab media, and the importance of women in Saudi media policy, this study focuses on *Star Academy* as a contentious media event, describing and analyzing various Saudi reactions to *Star Academy*, and zeroing in on what the controversy reveals about Saudi politics. The article concludes that *Star Academy* was so polemical in Saudi Arabia because the show subverted the religious bases of Saudi social order by promoting women's agency, featuring cultural hybridity and individuating authenticity.

Methodology and research questions

This study combines institutional research and critical discourse analysis (CDA). Institutional research focuses on production and programming strategies, based on primary sources such as interviews with managers, producers, directors, journalists (Turow, 2006), in addition to secondary research and polling data. Extensive multisited fieldwork included in-depth interviews with *Star Academy* senior staff and LBC management in Adma, Lebanon, with journalists and editors at Saudi-owned pan-Arab newspapers *Al-Hayat* and *Asharq Al-Awsat* in London, and with corporate researchers in Dubai who track the Saudi media market, conducted mostly between March 2004 and August 2005. (A separate list of 16 “personal communications” is provided in the interest of scholarly transparency, even though APA style requires interviews to be cited only in-text). No fieldwork was conducted on Saudi soil because initial consultations determined that this research was too controversial to be granted access. Selected from a larger data-set to eliminate redundancies, print sources used herein include the text of a *fatwa*, books by Saudi intellectuals (Al-Bishr, 2007; Al-Ghaddhami, 2005; Al-Hamad, 2001)—to this author's knowledge not available in English and never before discussed in communication scholarship—news stories, op-eds, drawn primarily from *Al-Riyadh* (eight items), a national newspaper based in the capital and reflecting Saudi establishment opinion, *Asharq-Al-Awsat* (five items), *Al-Hayat* (1 item), *Arab News* (seven items), an English-language daily based in Jidda, in addition to *Al-Quds Al-'Arabi* (three items), also London-based but editorially critical of the Saudi regime. Of these 30 Arabic language primary print sources, 13 have a women's byline, 13 are penned by men, and 4 have no byline. Audio-visual data include all episodes of the first season of *Star Academy*, various promotions for the show, and a talk-show segment dedicated to the controversy. All translations from Arabic and French are

the author's and an experienced Arab media researcher scrutinized this article to check facts and verify translation.

CDA focuses on “the role of discourse in the (re)production of challenge of dominance” (Van Dijk, 1993, p. 249, emphasis in original). This method considers meaning to be socially constructed by rival social and political actors. CDA is concerned with three questions about public discourse: How do people access it? What collectively shared representations—“social cognitions” (Van Dijk, 1993, p. 257)—of prevalent social relations dominate discourse in a given context? And, what is the resulting structure of discourse? CDA focuses on “elites and their discursive strategies” (Van Dijk, 1993, p. 250), which makes it a well-suited methodology for this study, where most of the data consist of statements by the Saudi elite (clerics, journalists, royals, etc). In brief, this study used institutional analysis and CDA to analyze rival discourses and their interactions with overlapping institutional, social, and political environments. It strives to answer two research questions:

R1: Why has Star Academy been so intensely controversial in Saudi Arabia?

After all, this is an Arabic-language program produced by a Lebanese network whose satellite channel is half-owned by Saudi investors, featuring Arab contestants. That this “Arab” cultural production would trigger a controversy shriller than previous outcries about “foreign” programs calls for more research. At the very least, the fact that some within the Saudi elite supported the show suggests that there are contradictory forces at work in Saudi Arabia and undermines the view that Saudi society is arch-conservative across the board. This leads to the second research question:

R2: What does the Star Academy controversy reveal about Saudi politics, which are usually highly secretive?

To address these questions, it is first necessary to explain the connection between Saudi national politics and the Arab satellite television industry, the subject of the following section.

Saudi politics and the Arab media revolution

The cradle of Islam and an energy superpower, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is ruled by the Al-Sa‘ud royal family whose reign is religiously sanctioned by the Al-Shaykh family of clerics (Abukhalil, 2003; Al-Rasheed, 2002). The seat of power represented by the Al-Sa‘ud-Al-Shaykh alliance remained relatively unchallenged until the 1970s when a rapid growth in oil wealth and urbanization spawned various political formations, two of which contested prevailing political arrangements (Al-Rasheed, 2007; Moaddel, 2006), especially after the upheaval brought by the 1991 Gulf War and the stationing of American troops on Saudi soil. On the one hand, Sahwi Islamists (*sahwa* means “awakening”) believed Saudi Arabia to be insufficiently Islamic and accused establishment clerics of selling out to the royal family (Al-Rasheed, 2002; Fandy, 1999). On the other hand, liberal activists advocate a more inclusive system that would enshrine political, minority, and women’s rights (Al-Rasheed, 2007; Hamzawy, 2006).

Saudi Arabia has no public institutional mechanisms for contesting the monarchy, because establishment Wahhabiya, a branch of Sunni Islam that is “religiously dogmatic, socially conservative and politically acquiescent” (Al-Rasheed, 2007, p. 5), validates royal authority over political and economic issues in exchange for clerical control over the social, educational, and cultural spheres (Abukhalil, 2003; Al-Bishr, 2007). According to state Wahhabiya, rulers can only be questioned discretely and deferentially (Al-Rasheed, 2007). However, rival conservative and liberal activists have since the 1990s submitted several petitions to the king advocating various reforms (Abukhalil, 2003; Al-Rasheed, 2007; Fandy, 1999), leading then *de facto* ruler and Crown Prince Abdullah to launch the National Dialogue Forum in June 2003, 2 years before he became the sixth King of Saudi Arabia in August 2005.

Participation in the National Dialogue Forum is restricted to a group of individuals handpicked by the king periodically to discuss issues under the auspices of the King Abdul Aziz Center for National Dialogue, whose president is the king himself. This reflects the secrecy endemic in Saudi politics: When in September 2005 King Abdullah met with a group of business and intelligentsia women, the tenor of their discussion was not revealed (Al-Rasheed, 2007). Although over the years the dialogues have become more public—some sessions were even televised, C-SPAN style, by state owned Saudi TV—and inclusive (Bundagji, 2008),

heretofore only “hundreds of Saudimen and women have engaged in six National Dialogue forums” (Qusti, 2007). In contrast, recurring controversies over popular culture have become prolonged public contests that draw a large number of clerics, intellectuals, journalists, and royals, and, most importantly, affective involvement by the Saudi public (Al-Bishr, 2007; Kraidy, 2007).

These polemics are no longer restricted to Saudi public discourse. Rather, they have a broader, pan-Arab resonance because of extensive Saudi involvement in Arabic-language media throughout the Middle East (Abukhalil, 2003; Azour, 2006; Boyd, 2001; Cochrane, 2007; Hammond, 2007). Saudi businessmen who began acquiring pan-Arab media in the 1970s (Boyd, 2001) now control *Al-Hayat* and *Asharq-Al-Awsat* (Alterman, 1998), the multichannel MBC group based in Dubai, several religious radio and television stations, in addition to stakes in various channels based in Egypt (al-Risala) and Lebanon (LBC) (see Kraidy & Khalil, 2007). Although there are other regional production centers, whether established like Egypt or emergent like Syria, Arab media is characterized by large-scale Saudi ownership (Kraidy & Khalil, in press).

While Saudi moguls have substantial stakes in pan-Arab media, Lebanese professionals occupy key ranks in advertising (Raveendran, 2004) and journalism (El-Oifi, 2006), especially as directors, producers, and managers in entertainment television (Kraidy, 2007; Le Pottier, 2003). The Saudi media buying spree snapped up numerous Lebanese journalists and advertising executives who fled their country during the 1975–1990 Civil War after earning professional experience in the myriad unlicensed television stations spawned by that war (Abukhalil, 2003; J. Al-Khazen, personal communication, June 7, 2005; Boyd, 2001). In the 1990s, budding Saudi television channels lured this large pool of media workers, many of whom remain with their Saudi employers (J. Al-Khazen, personal communication, June 7, 2005; M. Al-Nowaiser, personal communication, June 10, 2005). During the same period, LBC, originally launched in 1985 by a Christian-nationalist wartime militia (Boyd, 1991; Kraidy, 1998), received an infusion of Saudi investments (Kraidy, 2007). The ensuing success of Lebanese productions with Saudi viewers has nurtured an alliance of Saudi capital and Lebanese talent—the *Saudi–Lebanese connection*: Saudi capital funds Lebanese productions that are designed at least partly for Saudi viewers (S. Alavanthian, personal communication, June 30, 2004; A. Bibi, personal communication, June 5, 2004; S. Qandil, personal communication, June 2, 2004; see also Al-Rasheed, 2008). The liberal ethos of Lebanese productions has contributed to polemics over television in Saudi Arabia, but Saudi interelite rivalries (see Kraidy, 2007) and business interests have prevented Saudi media owners and investors from dictating uniform programming.

Women, national identity, and media policy in Saudi Arabia

Saudi national identity is deeply imbued with Wahhabiya’s focus on purifying Saudi Islam from foreign influence (Al-Rasheed, 2002, 2007). Anxieties about the social impact of technology, with its ability to move ideas across boundaries, are commonplace in Saudi history, regularly causing contention since “modernization” was declared a national objective in the 1930s (Al-Ghaddhami, 2005; Al-Rasheed, 2007; Boyd, 1970). Since then the television, Internet, and camera-equipped mobile telephones have caused various controversies (Kraidy, 2006).

The Saudi royal family introduced television in the 1960s to modernize a vast country with a fractious tribal population and to have a propaganda tool, important for a regime reeling at the time from a hostile media campaign from revolutionary Egypt (Boyd, 1970). Clerics dropped initial objections to television when they gained a key policy-making role resulting in strict censorship rules consistent with the tenets of Wahhabiya (see Boyd, 1999). Since then, prohibitions have included “Scenes which arouse sexual excitement;” “Women who appear indecently dressed, in dance scenes, or in scenes which show overt acts of love;” “Women who appear in athletic games or sports;” “Alcoholic drinks or anything connected with drinking;” “Derogatory references to any of the ‘Heavenly Religions;”” “Treatment of other countries with praise, satire, or contempt;” “References to Zionism;” “Material meant to expose the monarchy;” “All immoral scenes;” “References to betting or gambling;” and “Excessive violence” (Shobaili, 1972, as cited in Boyd, 1999, p. 164).

Media regulations reflect an unambiguous focus on gender issues because the separation of men and women lies at the heart of the Saudi social order (Al-Rasheed, 2007; Doumato, 1992). The ideal of the pious woman is central to Saudi identity: It is the bearer of authentic Islam as imagined by proponents of Wahhabiya (Doumato, 1992). As a result, Saudi social space is compartmentalized in order to prevent *ikhtilat*, or gender

mixing, and a sharp boundary between private and public space governs male–female interactions. Women are allowed in public space only in the company of a male guardian; they are banned from driving automobiles and until recently they were banned from traveling outside of the country without the company of a male relative. “[T]he official version of the ideal woman” sits at the core of the Saudi identity because it “defines the particular Muslim society of Saudi Arabia as something distinct from and morally superior to the West, as well as being superior to other Muslim countries where women are less rigidly separated” (Doumato, 1992, p. 33).

By focusing on protecting the ideal Islamic woman as a bearer of the nation’s identity, television censorship reflects the importance of rituals like gender segregation for the public performance of Islamic piety (Al-Rasheed, 2007). Wahhabi dogma focuses on the most detailed and intimate aspects of everyday life such as “women’s attire, false eyelashes, sports centres, body massage, hair removal” because of the “. . . the centrality of ritual practices in Wahhabi thought and expertise, used to control the social sphere” (Al-Rasheed, 2007, pp. 54–55, emphasis added). For this reason, television is crucial to the royal family that uses it to exalt its ostensible piety through broadcasting religious programs and rituals whose “repetitiveness and regularity of [religious television programs] confirm Saudi society as obsessively concerned with the ritualistic aspect of Islam . . . [reducing] a world religion to a set of prohibited and permissible actions for the sake of demonstrating the religiosity of power” (Al-Rasheed, 2007, p. 60). Television is a powerful ritual instrument in the hand of Saudi Arabia’s rulers.

Nonetheless, as the remainder of this article strives to demonstrate, Saudi Arabia’s entanglement in the transnational Arab media landscape diminished the reach of televised promonarchy religious rituals by providing Saudis with programming alternatives. Because pan-Arab advertising focuses on the wealthy Saudi audience (F. Abbas, personal communication, June 9, 2005; Cochrane, 2007; Kraidy, 2007; K. Darouny, personal communication, July 9, 2001; Mtayni, personal communication, May 31, 2004; S. Qandil, personal communications, June 2, 2004 and June 22, 2005), channels target Saudi viewers from Beirut, Cairo, and Dubai, locations where Saudi censors do not hold sway. Indeed, seeds of the Saudi upheaval around *Star Academy* reside in the special relationship between Saudi Arabia and LBC—a fulcrum of the Saudi–Lebanese connection. Ever since LBC began satellite broadcasting in 1996, Saudi investments (first from mogul Saleh Kamel, then mostly from Prince Al-Waleed Bin Talal) have enabled it to be a market leader. In addition to a news-gathering joint operation with *Al-Hayat*, owned by Saudi prince Salman Bin-‘Abdulaziz, LBC’s association with Al-Waleed bin Talal culminated in 2007 when LBC merged with Al-Waleed’s Rotana. LBC’s screen aesthetic reflects a socially liberal Lebanese ethos, characterized by ostensible mimicry of Western consumer lifestyles, slick production values, informality in newscasts and talk-shows, language mixing between Arabic, French, and sometimes English, and, most importantly, the ubiquity of alluringly dressed women (Kraidy, 2006).

If the Islamic ideal of the pious woman is central to Saudi Arabia’s national identity, the consumer ideal of the “Western-looking,” uninhibited woman is central to LBC’s corporate identity. When this author asked LBC’s General Manager Pierre el- Daher to distill his channel’s profile, he said “We are a general entertainment channel without social inhibitions” (P. el-Daher, personal communication, June 30, 2004). An ostensibly liberal mettle was manifest in LBC’s pre-satellite era (1985–1996), belied in primetime broadcasts of lingerie ads with some nudity. Commoditized femininity became LBC’s hallmark in the satellite era (after 1996) when Saudi tourists would reportedly drive to LBC headquarters northeast of Beirut and ask to meet Haifa, the suggestively attired star of an aerobics show (not to be confused with pop star Haifa Wehbi). In a revealing double-entendre, Arabs refer to LBC as *elbessee*, Arabic for “get dressed” (author field notes). LBC’s commoditization of the female form is central to its ability to create programs mixing high production values, lightheartedness, boldness, and titillation because, as LBC’s then Director of Programming told this author, these characteristics attract viewers, most importantly viewers from Saudi Arabia (S. Alavanthian, personal communication, June 30, 2004). Controversies ensue in Saudi Arabia because the *hypervisibility* of women’s bodies on LBC clashes head on with Wahhabiya’s compulsive *invisibility* of the female body in public space. It is against this institutional and social backdrop that the *Star Academy* controversy in Saudi Arabia is best understood.

***Star Academy*: A contentious media event**

LBC adapted *Star Academy* from an Endemol format and promoted it as the harbinger of Arab “reality TV”—ostensibly unscripted, featuring amateurs, and involving viewer participation. From a pan-Arab pool of 3000 applicants, LBC selected 16 finalists, 8 women and 8 men, who agreed to be sequestered for 4 months (December 2003 to April 2004) in “The Academy,” a four-story building near LBC headquarters in Adma, a Christian North eastern suburb of Beirut, Lebanon. They were monitored by 60 cameras in a logistically complex operation involving up to 250 staff (R. Sa’d, personal communication, July 5, 2004). Hailing from Egypt, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, and Syria, the *tullab* (students) attended performing arts “classes”—LBC framed the show as pedagogical. On Monday, a jury of media personalities announced two “nominees,” (the English word was used) whose names and photographs were posted on television and on the show’s website, launching a weeklong round of pan-Arab mobile phone and Internet voting to expel one of the nominees. *Star Academy* suffused LBC’s schedule with a nightly, 1-hour “access” (again, in English) show summarizing the day’s event, a weekly, 2-hour Friday “prime” (English) featuring live performances by contestants, at the end of which voting results are announced and the losing contestant exits “The Academy.” Viewers could peek inside the academy 24/7 for 4 months by watching *LBC Reality*, a dedicated satellite channel (R. Sa’d, personal communication, July 5, 2004; author field notes).

Star Academy was a media event in Saudi Arabia, so popular (Murshid, 2004) that its broadcasts achieved record ratings (J. Fakhreddine, personal communication, June 1, 2004; S. Qandil, personal communication, June 2, 2004), emptied streets in major cities like Jidda and Riyadh (F. Abbas, personal communication, June 9, 2005), animated debates, inspired Mosque sermons, and widely distracted students from focusing on final exams in May 2004 (Al-Humaydan, 2005). Unlike Dayan and Katz’s understanding of media events as milestones of social solidarity (1992), *Star Academy* was a *contentious* media event that generated wide-ranging rhetorical battles. Even the types of events that Dayan and Katz understand as “contests” operate under strict rules (see Dayan & Katz, 1992, chapter 2). In contrast, a contentious media event like *Star Academy* changes the rules of participation in the event, which make them closer to Fiske’s definition of a media event as “a point of maximum discursive visibility . . . [and] maximum turbulence . . . [that] invites intervention and motivates people to struggle to redirect some of the currents flowing through it to serve their interests” (Fiske, 1996, p. 8, see also Liebes and Katz, 2007, on disruptive media events). Rival Saudi social actors used the *Star Academy* controversy as “a site of popular engagement and involvement” (Fiske, 1996, p. 8), deploying strategic discourse and betraying various strands of dissent against clerico-royal power.

Conservative responses: Combating “Satan Academy”

In Saudi Arabia and other Islamic societies, questions from the faithful often prompt clerics to promulgate religious rulings called *fatwas*. In response to numerous questions from Saudi viewers on whether it was religiously *haram* (prohibited) or *halal* (permitted) to watch and participate in *Star Academy*, the “Permanent Committee for Scientific Research and the Issuing of Fatwas,” the highest such Saudi body, on March 30, 2004 issued a dedicated *fatwa* (Standing Committee for Scientific Research and the Issuing of Fatwas, 2004). It prohibited watching, discussing, voting in, or participating in *Star Academy*, and exhorted businessmen not to finance this type of programs. The committee’s main charge was that *Star Academy* violated and subverted Islamic principles because it carried “a number of serious evils” such as:

Free mixing of the sexes. . . . the main idea of [*Star Academy* and similar shows] is mixing between the sexes and removing all barriers between them, as well as the wanton display and unveiling on the part of women displaying their charms, which leads to much evil . . . *Blatant promotion of immorality.* . . . by making [Muslims] get used to seeing these shameful scenes that provoke desires and by distancing them from good morals and virtue (Standing Committee for Scientific Research and the Issuing of Fatwas, 2004, emphasis added).

Like Saudi censorship guidelines (Shobaili, 1972, as cited in Boyd, 1999), the *fatwa* is most concerned with women and their interaction with men. But unlike media regulations, which concern institutions, the *fatwa* calls upon believers directly and as individuals to actively oppose *Star Academy*: “It is not sufficient for you to abstain from watching these shows,” the *fatwa* stipulates, “[y]ou should also advise and remind those whom

you know watch them or take part in them in any way, because that comes under the heading of cooperating in righteousness and piety, and forbidding one another to engage in sin and transgression” (Standing Committee for Scientific Research and the Issuing of Fatwas, 2004). In a similar vein, an Imam (prayer leader) at Mecca’s Great Mosque called *Star Academy* a “Weapon of Mass Destruction” (Middle East Online, 2004).

Conservative reactions to *Star Academy* were not restricted to establishment clerics. Sahwi activists distributed fiery audio-cassette sermons titled “Satan Academy” (Abbas, 2005). Other radical clerics circulated a cassette tape called SARS Academy, comparing the reality show to the virulent virus that caused severe acute respiratory syndrome (Abbas, 2005). Even the relatively liberal *Al-Riyadh* published hostile op eds entitled “Star Academy: A Corrupt Satellite Industry” (Al-Moussa, 2006) and “Star Academy . . . The Other Terrorism” that claimed that “modesty and morals vanish when . . . young men and women get together, wearing clothes that provide modesty for very few parts of their bodies . . . express confusion about . . . authentic identity and culture . . .” (Al-‘Enezi, 2005). Deriding *Star Academy*’s pedagogical pretensions, the author concluded:

The objectives of this so-called ‘Star Academy’ . . . are progress and knowledge!! . . . which means . . . trampling the dearest thing that you have . . . your timeless (religious) beliefs and principles!! . . . there is a hand grabbing morals and tossing them aside and offering us modern art reeking of the smell of moral terrorism!! (Al-‘Enezi, 2005).

Viewing *Star Academy* as a harbinger of foreign values and therefore a threat to Saudi authenticity, the column is typical of conservative attacks, beginning with concerns about cultural decline and social confusion, subsequently invoking religion as a definitive argument against the show’s imputed moral defects (see also Al-Dakhil, 2005, Al-Dawyan, 2005; Standing Committee for Scientific Research and the Issuing of Fatwas, 2004).

Liberal responses: Embracing social change

In sharp contrast, other writers in Saudi newspapers praised *Star Academy* as an alternative to extremist dogma (Nasrallah, 2004), an invitation to dialogue (Al-Jabban, 2005), or for inspiring lessons in democracy: In a column titled “Star Academy’s Democracy,” a Saudi female journalist (Al-Bishr, 2005) wrote the following:

Arabs shied away from voting because . . . [of fraud] . . . until satellite television . . . corrupted us by inciting us to vote: “vote, you are the referee” . . . “nominate your favorite candidate” . . . the [Arab] viewer has become obsessed with voting . . . because results resemble election results in the United States, where unlike Arab elections, nobody wins by 99.99%, but rather by logical proportions.

Writing during the first municipal (local) elections in Saudi Arabia, she concludes that “therefore, the fire of voting is ablaze among . . . Saudi citizens, men and women, old and young, who enthusiastically voted in the *Star Academy* show . . . the (Saudi) municipal elections . . . can benefit from the experiment of *Star Academy*, using procedures that demonstrate to voters that their vote has value . . .” (Al-Bishr, 2005).

Other liberals were exasperated by the conservatives’ excessive reaction to *Star Academy*. Another woman, a journalist writing in the Jidda-based *Arab News*, asked: “How vulnerable we must be if a TV program can ‘destroy our moral standards’, and teach out children bad things. If our society is that weak, then we have every reason to stop all TV programs, close our doors and windows and stay at home . . .” (Mishkhas, 2004). She then narrated the following anecdote:

A mother of three boys who are avid watchers of *Star Academy* told me: “I know it’s a silly program, but kids need some fun. Society does not provide them with much to do, so what do they do with their spare time? Can they go to clubs? No. Can they go to public libraries? No. So what are they supposed to do? I saw her point . . . What do we give our teenagers? We give them everything except the right guidance and venues to expend their energies! So if we stop *Star Academy* . . . will our problems end? Will we turn into a utopian society?” (Mishkhas, 2004)

In contrast to Wahhabiya's focus on censorship and prohibition, liberal columnists used the *Star Academy* polemic to discuss alternatives for Saudi youth (in another column, 'Mishkhas (2005) argued that moral arguments against *Star Academy* are akin to "tilting at the wrong windmills").

A major liberal voice hailed from within the royal family. Prince Al-Waleed Bin Talal of mixed Saudi-Lebanese parentage, nephew of King 'Abdallah and major stakeholder in LBC's satellite channel, supported *Star Academy*. Al-Waleed was clearly one of the "businessmen" alluded to in the anti-*Star Academy fatwa*. Al-Waleed, who through a spokesperson issued a "no comment" comment on the *fatwa*, sent his private plane to Beirut to bring Hisham 'Abdel Rahman back to Saudi Arabia after the young Saudi won *Star Academy 2* ("Hisham is," 2005), causing nationwide late night celebrations in the kingdom (Abushaybah, 2005; Al-Osaimi, 2005). Bin Talal's commercial interests were on display when 'Abdel Rahman was photographed brandishing the *Star Academy* trophy while standing next to a large logo of Rotana, the prince's Arabic music label and television empire ("Hisham is," 2005) that merged with LBC's satellite operation in 2007. When the Saudi religious police jailed 'Abdel Rahman for "sparking an indecent gathering" after spotting teenage girls hugging and kissing him at a shopping mall in Jidda (Al-Matrafi, 2005), the prince secured his release and invited 'Abdel Rahman to visit him at his palace, with pictures of the meeting appearing in several Saudi newspapers ("Hisham is," 2005; Prince Al-Waleed, 2005). Unwavering, Al-Waleed stated "we will continue our journey in supporting Saudi youth and discovering and nurturing their artistic and athletic talents" (Prince Al-Waleed, 2005), subsequently offering Hisham a lead role in the first indigenously produced Saudi movie, further flaunting his disregard for establishment Wahhabiya ("Saudis become," 2006).

The Saudi novelist and columnist Turki Al-Hamad has been a prominent liberal in this continuing debate over Saudi modernity and authenticity, whose advocacy of "getting rid of that obsessive fear over the loss of our identity and culture" (Al-Hamad, 2001, p. 13), clashes head on with Wahhabiya's obsession with protecting Saudi purity and authenticity from alien influence. In an op-ed in the Dubai-based *al-Bayan*, Al-Hamad (2005) wrote thus:

The concept of cultural invasion is premised on [the] concept . . . of "authenticity," assuming that there is a complete or pure authenticity that needs to be preserved in the face of "intellectual invasion" . . . if everyone adopted that definition of authenticity and therefore the concept of cultural invasion, humans would not have gone beyond the stone age . . . Pure authenticity is an illusion equal to the illusion of the pure race . . . It is usually the weakest party in intercultural . . . relations that invokes the concept of cultural invasion . . . it expresses its fear, anxiety, and weakness in terms like cultural invasion, similar to a military invasion, and it takes up the cause of authenticity . . . all these are defense mechanisms . . . [that] do not reflect the dynamic nature of culture . . . Isolation is in truth the weakest protection . . . even if it appears to be the strongest. History tells us that." (Al-Hamad, 2005)

Because of Al-Hamad's challenge to Wahhabi norms of authenticity, clerics repeatedly declared him a *kafir* (infidel), but king Abdullah took him under his protection and reportedly offered him his own pen (Al-Rasheed, 2007) in a symbolically potent protective, but also co-optive gesture—Al-Hamad eschews Saudi politics in the regular column he currently publishes in *Asharq Al-Awsat* (he mostly writes toothless columns about Iraq or Arab-Western relations). Nonetheless, the Saudi culture wars continue with Al-Hamad voicing concerns for his safety after a recent *fatwa* declared that liberals were not true Muslims ("Saudi fatwa," 2007).

For a period of time, the *Star Academy* controversy became an important forum for this ongoing struggle. Not only did conservatives and liberals duel on op-ed pages, but an official *fatwa* underscored that some members of the royal family who are close to the establishment clerics were opposed to the show while others, like Al Waleed Bin Talal, were not. In a country devoid of political institutions where such issues could be publicly deliberated (see Al-Rasheed, 2007), the *Star Academy* battle royal publicized contending views of Saudi identity and authenticity. More importantly, *Star Academy's* widespread popularity in spite of intense polemic suggest that many Saudis may be ambivalent toward both conservative and liberal poles, an issue examined in the following section.

Neither liberal nor conservative? The ambivalence of the Saudi public

On March 7, 2004, as the first season of *Star Academy* was entering its final month, LBC's Sunday night talk-show *Al-Hadath* focused on *Star Academy* (Al-Hadath, 2004). The discussion reiterated arguments already represented in this article, but a report from Saudi Arabia suggests a new dimension. In a spacious coffee house Saudi men were seated in the background sipping coffee, smoking *shishas* (water pipes), or eating while watching *Star Academy* on a wide screen; the reporter declares that "Opinions differed on the Saudi street which appeared to be more opposed to than supportive of *Star Academy*" and explains that "Saudi society is conservative and its customs and traditions may not be compatible with the program" (Al-Hadath, 2004). Then, one by one, the Saudis walked to the foreground of the coffee house to answer the reporter's queries and made statements:

Interviewee 1: *Star Academy* is successful with the public in all criteria, but it has some defects and some points of contention, especially the transfer of Western culture, like kissing and gender mixing.

Interviewee 2: *Star Academy* has supporters and opponents. I am an opponent because in all sincerity *Star Academy* has gender mixing between male and female students.

Reporter: The participation of the Saudi youth Mohammed Al-Khalawi in the program stirred interest among Saudis, who followed the program and nominated contestants, in solidarity with their compatriot.

Interviewee 3: Of course there was Mohammed Al-Khalawi [but] there was exaggeration in showing immoral things. However I cannot say that the program is not successful and I hope it will continue and that there will be a part 2, and I hope that the number of participants from Gulf countries will increase.

Reporter: The program has created conflict within families, where fathers and mothers are worried that their sons and daughters are exposed to behavior that is not compatible with their convictions.

Interviewee 4: Frankly *Star Academy* is a successful program . . . on all criteria, but there are some reservations. (*The camera pans back and forth on the all-male audience watching the show, including previous interviewees.*) Because people watch it every day, it creates problems between parents and the fans of the program, especially teenagers; at home there are problems between my two parents and my brothers and sisters, "watch it! Do not watch it!" . . . Surely, however, frankly, as an idea and as a program *Star Academy* is successful.

Interviewee 5: I am among the opponents of this program, and I do not support it. Obviously we know the view of Islamic Shari'a (religious law) on gender mixing. (*Star Academy* contestants) are on the air live 24 hours a day, and there are love relationships. I cannot see myself in that program.

Reporter: There is a lot of controversy over *Star Academy* on the Saudi street, to the extent that we can say that this program 'filled the world' and preoccupied people, both those who reject it and those who accept it." (Al-Hadath, 2004)

Although women writers such as Al-Bishr (2005), Mishkhas (2004, 2005), Al-Dabib (2005), Al-Dakhil (2005), and others articulated defenses and critiques of *Star Academy*, the fact that no Saudi women participated in the exchange quoted above reflects the fact that public space in Saudi Arabia is a male domain. Nonetheless, the excerpt shows that a slice of the male Saudi public was clearly ambivalent about *Star Academy*, as young men took turns facing the camera, said something like "I like it, but I have moral reservations," then regained their seats and resumed watching. Were they simply voicing moral objections to play "as if," pretending to follow Wahhabi prescriptions? Or were they watching *Star Academy*, in spite of genuine moral reservations, because "everyone else" was?

Partial answers reside in recent surveys that found the Saudi public to be ambivalent about social issues (Moaddel, 2006; Rheault, 2007). Although "[r]eligion, women, and democracy are among the most contested categories in the intellectual debates about the future of the kingdom" (Moaddel, 2006, p. 92), 71% of Saudis, the survey reveals, are in favor of democracy and 59% agree that a working mother can establish as warm a relationship with her children as a stay-at-home mother. In contrast, 23% of Saudis disagreed that men make better political leaders than women and 81% of Saudis agreed that a woman must always obey her husband. Only 5% disagreed on that last question. Among the survey's rather unexpected findings is that overall "the Saudi public appears to be *less* religious than Egyptians and Jordanians" (Moaddel, 2006, emphasis added). More recently, a Gallup poll found the Saudi public to be even more liberal, with majorities

supporting various freedoms for women: 55% of Saudi men and 66% of Saudi women support women's right to drive a car (which has been legally forbidden since 1991); 75% of men and 82% of women support women having jobs outside of the home, a gender gap of 7 compared to 21 points in Egypt (Rheault, 2007). The same poll found that 83% of Saudi men and 84% of Saudi women agree that "women should be allowed to keep all earnings from their jobs for themselves and that their husbands should support their households in full," with percentages on this issue in Egypt standing at 48% for women and 51% of men (percentages of Europeans of both genders who agreed to this statement were 58% in France, 38% in Germany, and 34% in the United Kingdom!) (Rheault, 2007).

If Saudis are less religious than is commonly assumed, then attitudes and official policy towards gender are at least partly inspired by social norms that overlap but are not subsumed into religious beliefs and practices (Doumato, 1992). Although couched in religious language, these norms hark back to older political bases. According to Doumato (1992), in the past piety was measured by men's action, behavior, and dress. The shift to women's piety as a symbol of a virtuous society occurred because of political expediency, because it appealed to Saudis across religion, region, and social class. Thus "the separation and nonpublic presence of women are a way of making Islam visible" because "[t]he public invisibility of women has become a way to display one's faith, to make religion something tangible that can be measured by others" (Doumato, 1992, p. 45).

Patriarchy and political expediency, rather than strictly religion, explains gender segregation, a central tenet of an ostensibly religious discourse that is in fact a political idiom of governance: "[T]he Wahhabi 'ulama,'" wrote Al-Rasheed (2007), "contributed to the consolidation of a state that is politically secular and socially religious" (p. 57). Policies towards women—including health and employment benefits—are framed in religious terms to win legitimacy (Doumato, 1992). More importantly, gender separation is a royal emblem of religiosity. During the turbulent years of 1979 and 1980, when the Saudi regime faced armed dissent, and then again in the 1990s when Saudi rulers had to validate the presence of American troops in the 1991 Gulf war, many *fatwas* and police actions focused on gender separation, illustrating how a focus on gender deflects political tensions (Al-Rasheed, 2007; Doumato, 1992; see also Al-Bishr, 2007).

Reality TV and the redefinition of authenticity

What specifically about *Star Academy* struck such a sensitive chord in Saudi Arabia? As already explained, one answer can be found in the paradoxical relationship between LBC and Wahhabiya's view on gender segregation, the former making women's bodies *hypervisible*, the latter striving to make the female form *invisible*. Featured nightly on *Star Academy*, images of young Arab and mostly Muslim men and women suggestively dressed, dancing, hugging, and singing together on stage or in their common house have provoked controversy because *Star Academy* displays a lifestyle that breaches the Saudi prohibition on *ikhtilat*, the illicit mixing of men and women. Women not only dress immodestly; they touch men physically, and sing and dance; they also publicly disagree and argue with the men on the show, compete with them, and even sometimes beat them in various competitions. By being, in the words of one Saudi critic "A Sincere Invitation to *Ikhtilat*" (Al-Dawyan, 2005), *Star Academy* offers an alternative social reality imbued with women's agency, albeit contrived and commoditized, and thus inimical to Saudi definitions of a social order. This is compounded by LBC promotions touting the "real" aspect of the "reality TV" show, which spurred vehement objections from clerics infuriated by the claim that *Star Academy* represented reality. As detailed in the following section, there are two other important reasons behind the polemic: First, reality TV lured Saudi viewers to hybrid cultural forms; second, *Star Academy* individuated authenticity.

Fracturing reality: The lure of the hybrid

According to Garcia-Canclini (1998) (p. 2), "the uncertainty about the meaning and value of modernity derives not only from what separates nations, ethnic groups, and classes, but also from the sociocultural hybrids in which the traditional and the modern are mixed." Whereas Arab culture offers myriad examples of cultural mixture, satellite television gives Arabs some of their most public, and therefore most controversial, sociocultural hybrids in the form of format-adapted reality TV programs. As culturally ambiguous categories, these shows muddle identity and authenticity and confound the boundaries between the domestic and the foreign, between the Arab and the alien (see Kraidy, 2005).

Star Academy is all the more controversial because its negation of cultural purity is amplified by its unprecedented popularity. As Al-Azmeh (1993) argued, “[T]he notion of authenticity is not so much a determinate concept as it is a node of associations and interpellations, a trope by means of which the historical world is reduced to a particular order, and a token that marks off social and political groups and forges and reconstitutes historical identities” (p. 82). The discourse on authenticity is at the heart of the Wahhabi worldview, whose norms and principles focus on gender segregation and cultural purity, enforced through ritualistic behavior in prayer, dress, and social relations (Al-Rasheed, 2007; Doumato, 1992). A cultural hybrid of the foreign and the native, *Star Academy* threatens the core of Wahhabiya in two specific ways. It crystallizes a radically pluralistic world and compels participants to enact alien social norms.

As the Arabic version of a European format, *Star Academy* is a mixture of multiple cultural predilections. The contestants’ demeanor reflects the liberal extreme of Lebanese social mores, themselves significantly more relaxed than Saudi customs. In the show, several North African and Lebanese contestants speak an Arabic peppered with French words and many performances are in French and English, and occasionally in Spanish or even Hindi. English is the show’s logistical *lingua franca*, as in “star academy” and “nominee,” and the notion of “star” itself is very American. Friday primes are carnivalesque spectacles, with music and dance tableaux alternating traditional Lebanese musicals, *khaliji* (Arabian Gulf) songs, a Bollywood performance, Broadway musicals, French Cancan, Russian circus numbers, and Chinese dance. Various generic elements from distinct cultural registers are recombined in individual performances. From the view of Wahhabiya, this radical and hybrid eclecticism invokes the *jahiliyya*—literally the “age of ignorance”—the chaotic pre-Islamic era on the Arabian Peninsula characterized by fragile tribal orders and fluid gender boundaries, and should therefore be strenuously opposed.

By grafting an Arabic language program on a Western format, *Star Academy* is what Bakhtin (1981) would call an “intentional”—in contrast to an “organic”—hybrid. Unlike organic hybridity, which is “unintentional, unconscious hybridization” (p. 358), a product of intercultural contact, intentional hybridity is “concrete and social” (p. 360, emphasis in original). Bakhtin (1981) argues that “an intentional hybrid is precisely the perception of one language by another language” and concludes that “[A]n image of language may be structured only from the point of view of another language, which is taken as the norm” (p. 359). Because Western standards set production norms for Arab reality TV programs, *Star Academy* depicts not merely a fantasy world that viewers watch, but a social world enacted ritualistically through viewing practices. Because reality TV claims to represent reality, *Star Academy* posits a *normative* social world, exemplifying what Martín-Barbero (1993) calls *mestizaje*, “the sense of continuities in discontinuity and reconciliations between rhythms of life that are mutually exclusive” (p. 188). To its critics, *Star Academy* is neocolonial precisely because it asks contestants to ritualistically perform a social world alien to Wahhabiya’s values, with “Lebanese” social norms acting as intermediary between the Western format and its Saudi viewers.

The Western literature articulates authenticity for the most part as a minority discourse (see Mcleod, 1999). In contrast, invocations of authenticity in Saudi Arabia *appear* to be a majority discourse. Indeed, the influence of Wahhabiya means that an extreme version of the discourse of authenticity, one that emphasizes purity and separation from an outside world that is postulated as morally inferior, sits at the core of national identity and policy. *Star Academy* draws Saudi viewers to participate in rituals—watching, voting, and so forth—that enact a syncretistic identity, subverting the notion of cultural purity cardinal to Saudi identity. The ensuing polemic exposes Wahhabiya’s fear and rejection of the outside world, all the more so because the show ritually enacts, and therefore upholds, alien values and norms.

The individuation of cultural authenticity

Star Academy undermines the prevalent notion of authenticity in a more fundamental way due to formal elements of the reality genre whose success largely depends on its ostensible liveness (see Couldry, 2003). The claim to reality itself is based on the premise that what viewers see on the screen is spontaneous and unrehearsed. Like many other reality shows, the key moments in *Star Academy* are the points in time when participants are caught (by cameras) being their *authentic selves*. It is precisely when contestants allegedly lose sight of the cameras that reality TV reaffirms its claims to reality and liveness. While from the audience’s point of view this feature represents one of reality TV’s main attractions, these “moments of truth” in the context of reality television’s claim to the real, signal a redefinition of the notion of authenticity from obedience to Wahhabi dictates to an individual performance through which the contestant reveals his or her “true,”

authentic self, validating the whole reality TV enterprise. *Star Academy* not only conjures up a social order inimical to Wahhabiya, it also feats the individual as the locus of identity.

This personally experienced, individually performed authenticity lies at the heart of reality TV's presumptive connection to reality (Aslama & Panti, 2006). Claims to represent reality are fiercely contested in Saudi Arabia because establishment Wahhabiya claims a monopoly on representing social reality. In contrast, *Star Academy* turns viewers into *witnesses* of a reality created by a television genre that itself claims to represent reality. Witnessing involves searching one's memory to extract the details of that eventful moment, when the witness was present in space (there) and time (then) and then rendering the event to an audience that was not present when the event occurred (Peters, 2001). Viewers experiencing *Star Academy* as a 24/7 flow await the eventful moment—the moment of authenticity—with anticipation. They are, in a sense, witnesses in reverse. Unlike witnessing, which is “retroactive” (Peters, 2001, p. 722), the ritualized watching of *Star Academy* is *proactive*. Whereas witnesses are compelled to produce a verisimilar rendering of a past event, reality TV viewers are enthralled by the future possibility of the program going “off-script.” The former calls for a narrowing of alternatives to come as close as possible to a necessary “truth”; the latter proliferates alternatives whose “authenticity” rests on their liveness, hence their contingency. Viewers wait for contestants to forget the cameras and “come out” as their true, authentic self, the moment when authenticity comes into being (although some contestants become adept actors with contrived “spontaneous” outbursts). Viewing in this case is a kind of intense, vigilant, intentional—albeit reverse—witnessing.

Reality TV's transformation of viewers into witnesses to contrived events is controversial because witnesses are essential for the legitimization of events. *Star Academy* viewers therefore become agents in the creation of a contemporary social reality that clashes head on with regnant Saudi definitions of authenticity. Viewing as witnessing essentially entails the ritual diffusion of the power to define social reality. In Saudi Arabia, ritualistic Islam is a dominant preoccupation. As Al-Rasheed (2007) explains, Saudi society “evolved into a community of the faithful who vigorously engage in controlled *‘ibadat* (rituals of worship), both communal and individual, that are regularly displayed in the public sphere.” “Such display,” the author continues, “is strictly controlled, and any deviation is condemned as innovation” (p. 59). *Star Academy* depicts alternative rituals of engagements on a popular television show at a time when Wahhabi clerics have turned “[p]rayer, fasting, and pilgrimage . . . into spectacles regularly dramatized on local and satellite television channels” (Al-Rasheed, 2007, p. 59). Reality TV therefore poses a threat to Wahhabi prescribed and publicized rituals of religious and social reproduction.

Conclusion

The Saudi debate over *Star Academy* is a particularly contentious episode in ongoing Saudi debates about modernity, identity, the role of Islam in public life, gender relations, and political participation. On one level, it reflects political and social anxieties about the redefinition of national sovereignty in the age of transnational media that transcend political borders and cultural boundaries. On another level, the polemic betrays the clash between Wahhabiya's focus on cultural separation and purity on the one hand and the business interests of some Saudi princes, which are dependent on trade and exchange that bring various cultural values and lifestyles into contact, on the other hand. The debate is also a vivid example of the important public role that mediated popular culture can take in a context devoid of public institutions for debate and deliberation (see Kraidy, in press, for a detailed theoretical discussion of this issue). In addition to being a catalyst and platform for debate, the *Star Academy* controversy revealed political and social fault lines not only within the Saudi social, intellectual, and media elite but also within the ruling clerico-political establishment. As such, the controversy is a heuristic tool for understanding political dynamics in Saudi Arabia. Like a seismograph, contention surrounding popular culture registers shocks that would have otherwise remained under the surface of public discourse. Notably, the ambivalence of the Saudi public on social issues, coupled with elite polarization over a combination of hot button issues represented by *Star Academy*, betrays the absence of a national consensus on gender roles, Western influence and the role of religion in public life. Rather, it is likely that these issues will continue to be animated by various developments, including controversial media and popular culture.

Those who consider themselves guardians of Saudi morality perceived *Star Academy* to be an existential threat because the show articulates an alternative social reality, therefore undermining the core

principles of the prevalent social order. The prohibition on gender mixing lies at the center of the Saudi social system and the preservation of an unadulterated Saudi authenticity is a core concern of Wahhabiya's ultra-conservative worldview. By creating an environment of unbridled gender and cultural mixing, *Star Academy* posed a direct affront to the most vital components of Saudi authenticity—the country's existential, and not only social, center—defined by the political–religious establishment. Although no Saudi female participated in *Star Academy*, the upheaval created by the show made the displacement of that center visible. The popularity and controversy of *Star Academy* are therefore explained by its articulation of a “reality” that not only clashes with the Saudi social order, but subverts its most elemental building blocks. That such a subversion of the Wahhabi order resonated so deeply and widely in Saudi society, as *Star Academy*'s popularity indicates, suggests that there is a Saudi constituency for an alternative, more inclusive and less restrictive society.

Indeed, the broad participation in the *Star Academy* debate reflects deep hopes and anxieties related to social and political change. In *Star Academy* liberals glimpsed fleeting visions, even if contrived, of a more participatory and inclusive society, one with less clerical influence and a wider margin of individual autonomy. In contrast, clerics' ontic engagement with the formal characteristics of reality TV—discussing and rejecting its claims to representing reality—suggests that they understand the new kinds of agency, which become possible when viewers become avid fans of programs that are based on ritualistic viewer engagement and participation in an environment hegemony through similar mediated rituals. This also suggests that opponents of reality TV discern that popular participation in the ritualistic redefinition of authenticity threatens the prevalent social order—in that sense *Star Academy*'s popularity may signal a loosening of Wahhabiya's grip on Saudi society.

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