

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, nonscripted and therefore "real". In short, the impact of entertainment television on public discourse in developing countries<sup>(7)</sup> 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."<sup>(8)</sup> 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.<sup>(9)</sup> 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<sup>(10)</sup>. 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.<sup>(11)</sup> 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.<sup>(12)</sup> 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. 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!" 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.<sup>(26)</sup> 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.<sup>(27)</sup> 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 alMawda, 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. 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. Talkshows 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 alTabtaba'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 laissez-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. 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.<sup>(59)</sup> 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.<sup>(60)</sup> 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. 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'i 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. 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.<sup>(46)</sup> Religious leaders were inundated with requests for rulings on whether it was haram or halal to watch and participate in the show. 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 cosponsored 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.<sup>(18)</sup> 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." Such scholars now eschew the excesses of "active audience" theory.<sup>(61)</sup> 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. Marwan M. Kraidy is Assistant Professor of international relations and international communication at American University and a Fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, both in Washington, DC; and a TBS Contributing Editor. He is the author of *Hybridity, or, The Cultural Logic of Globalization* (Temple University Press, 2005), and co-editor of *Global Media Studies: Ethnographic Perspectives* (Routledge, 2003). He is working on his current book project, *Screens of Contention: Arab Media and the Challenges of Modernity* at the Wilson Center. Sections of this article were presented at the University of Texas Austin in February 2005 the University of Westminster in June 2005, and Kuwait University in November 2005. The author is grateful to the United States Institute of Peace for funding part of the fieldwork on which this study is based; and to Marlena Badway, Joe F. Khalil, Naomi Sakr and the two anonymous peer-reviewers for their helpful recommendations. 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 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.<sup>(30)</sup> 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."<sup>(31)</sup> 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.<sup>(32)</sup> In the Arab context, references to "national reputation" arise in the context of government suppression of political dissent or, less frequently, sexual content. 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. Star Academy 2's producers also strategically drew on al-Hariri's assassination.