

Neocolonizing the Nation: American Pop Culture and Saudi Television

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Abstract To allow Americans to enter Saudi Arabia in 1945, King Abdulaziz sought counseling from the religious party where they issued a fatwa of permission. Only then were the Americans able to help the Saudis extract oil and build the world's largest industrialized oil company, Aramco (McHale 622–623). The subject of this paper is not the oil industry but its consequences and impacts on Saudi culture. Focusing on television, this paper examines the impact of American pop culture and its neocolonial influence on Saudi culture. Through the first English Saudi channel, which was founded in 1957, American pop culture introduced America to Saudi citizens. It also examines the hegemonic impact of American pop culture on Saudi Arabia that, while being resisted by fundamentalist religious groups, has contributed to the reshaping of Saudi modern culture.

Keywords Pop-Culture; Neocolonialism; Television; Imperialism; Religion

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Introduction

[Cultural imperialism is the] sum of the processes by which a society is brought into the modern world system, and how its dominating stratum is attracted, pressured, forced, and sometimes bribed into shaping social institutions to correspond to, or even to promote, the values and structures of the dominant center of the system.

—Herbert I. Schiller, *Communication and Cultural Domination*.

In 2013, while taking my first graduate course in pop-culture, I realized that some Americans were not aware of the influence of American television on Saudis. My classmates kept wondering how I understood some of their cultural references. I, on the other hand, was curious about how much Americans know about Saudi Arabia. Do they know, for instance, that in Saudi Arabia “there is a direct family relationship between the ultimate owner and the head of state, and the governing system is a single-party state, [and that] we classify the media enterprise as state owned?” (Djankov 353) The fact that Saudi media is state owned has led to American popular media being given priority and becoming more influential in Saudi Arabia, but how did this happen? By saying “priority,” I simply mean that since the U.S. government was the first to assist the Saudis in extracting oil, Americans were most likely the first Western foreigners to be allowed to live and work with Saudis. To allow Americans to enter Saudi Arabia in 1945, King Abdulaziz sought counseling from the religious party where they issued a fatwa of permission. It was only then that Americans were able to extract oil and build the world’s largest industrialized oil company, known as Aramco (McHale 622–623). The subject of this paper is not the oil industry but its neocolonialist tendencies and impacts on Saudi media and culture. To narrow down the scope of the paper, I examine the role of television during the late twentieth century through a cultural and historical reading of Saudi television within the context of neocolonialism. I suggest that after being recognized as a useful propaganda, television was not only used to counter conservative groups, but also to shape the nation’s upcoming generations. By “conservative groups,” I mean the Saudis who regard the consumption of Western technology as a threat to Islamic teachings and identity. On the other hand, there was another religious group who thought of Television as a media and an opportunity to preach the Islamic faith as officiated by the Saudi government. Television, therefore, became and remains a means through which religious and political creeds intersect to shape generations of Saudis.

Despite the opposing fundamentalist party, the Saudi media introduced television to accommodate hundreds of American expatriates who lived in Saudi Arabia. As a result, during the second half of the twentieth century, American shows were broadcasted on cable television to entertain American expatriates who were far away from their own popular culture. Consequently, “Aramco Television went on the air for the first time on September 17, 1957. The inaugural broadcast, which was also the first Arabic-language television broadcast to originate in Saudi Arabia, was a reading from the Koran” (Archive. Aramcoworld). Years later, the second English Saudi Channel Two (1982–2017) was founded to serve as a local entertainment

option for expatriates:

In 1982, Saudi Arabia's channel Two only transmitted 10 hours' worth of programming a day and was targeted towards foreign residents in the kingdom. This is because of the large number of expatriates living in the kingdom and the channel was launched to provide some form of entertainment for them and shed light on the country's cultural and economic heritage. Because of its reliance on terrestrial transmission at that time, foreign residents were the channel's main target audience. (2nd Channel of the Saudi Ministry of Culture and Information)

Although, the targeted viewers for Channel Two when it was launched were foreign residents— mostly Americans, it became available to all residents of Saudi Arabia. Most of the entertainment shows were American, allowing Saudi citizens, for the first time, to be introduced to the America through television. Therefore, it is possible to claim that American television had a neocolonialist impact on Saudi culture. Accordingly, the hegemonic presence of American television in Saudi Arabia, albeit being resisted by conservative groups, contributed to shaping modern Saudi culture and influencing the millennial generation—thus underwriting the Saudi media's efforts to counter fundamentalist groups. In other words, American television can be recognized as a means through which radical religious or antigovernment groups are suppressed.

Radical religious groups acted on their radicalism in 1975, less than twenty years since the inauguration of the first Saudi Channel by Aramco. "Religion was one of the apparent reasons for the assassination of a king. Faisal ibn Masad, the murderer of King Faisal in 1975, may have killed the king in revenge for the death of his brother at the hands of the Saudi police as he forcibly tried to stop the introduction of television into Saudi Arabia for religious reasons" (William Ochsenwald 272). Fundamentalist groups still exist in Saudi Arabia, but it should be clarified that the current religion of Saudi Arabia does not oppose television, but rather embraces it as a means for spreading moderate religious teachings. Just like televangelists, certain religious imams turned to television to spread God's word to as many people as possible. The Saudi government during the 1980s resisted radical religious groups that objected to television. In doing so, it was able to spread and strengthen its doctrine and suppress potential radical religious parties. Since then, Saudi television has become more than a means for delivering news and broadcasting recitations of the Quran. Saudi television has become a source

of entertainment for all Saudi citizens. Yet, we must acknowledge the fact that the history of allowing television in Saudi Arabia is marked by the existence of American expatriates in the country, as T. R. McHale states:

Television was introduced into the Kingdom by Aramco for its employees in 1957. While radio was grudgingly accepted after many years, television was bitterly fought by the more conservative members of the community. In 1965, when the Government established its station, strong elements in the Royal Family as well as in religious groups bitterly opposed the move. (624)

In 1957, the first Saudi channel started to air Arabic and American shows and movies. However, its morning children entertainment shows were American cartoons, such as *Tom and Jerry*, *Mickey Mouse*, *Popeye*, *Spiderman*, *Tiny Toon Adventures*, and *Looney Tunes*. The difference between then and now is that today's American children shows are in Arabic and are aired on a new separate channel, *Generations* or *Ajyal*. The American cartoons were considered as the beginning of what followed in 1982. By then, Saudi Channel Two was airing children's cartoons, wrestling, Western movies, and series such as *Lonesome Dove* and many varied genres of movies and shows such as *The Incredible Hulk*, *Black Beauty*, *Airwolf*, *Different Strokes*, *The Electric Company*, *Doogie Howser M.D.*, *Little House on the Prairie*, *The Waltons*, *Full House*, and *Lost in Space* (2nd Channel of the Saudi Ministry of Culture and Information). The influence, and perhaps the hegemony, of American television manifested itself in the historical development of television broadcasted to Saudis. As a result, many Saudis were first introduced to American culture through television, which eventually may have influenced and contributed to reshaping their identities.

Religion and Modernity

During the Gulf War of 1990, religious extremists, despite their initial absolute rejection of Television, used Western technology to produce video tapes encouraging acts of jihad against American troops. Paradoxically, after television was fought during the era of King Faisal, the existence of television helped to spread antigovernment conspiracies. Mamoun Fandy, a political science critic who examines Saudi Arabia and its relation to radicalism and the media, notes that two Saudi preachers "gained prominence during the Gulf crisis as a result of their daring criticism of the deployment of American troops on Saudi soil. Due to the state monopoly of radio, television, and newspapers, the preachers used cassette tapes

and occasional video tapes to propagate their messages” (131). Is it possible that American television has contributed to the majority of Saudi people’s stand against radical preachers?

Only after the first Gulf War (1990), the Saudis recognized the significance of satellite television and its empowerment of people’s stance against radicalism. However, religious radicals considered satellite television as a Western threat full of immoral shows that led millennials to stray from the true path of Islam. There were fatwas that forbade the consumption of radio and cable television. Nonetheless, satellite television remained a powerful tool for American hegemonic media. Therefore, more television shows were broadcasted and thus more American content was consumed and digested. The difference between Saudi Channel Two and satellite television is that the latter has varieties of material to offer, including original American channels such as FOX and CNN. The impact of American television expanded, leading to more Arabic channels viewing American films and shows accompanied by Arabic subtitles.

Therefore, American television can be considered an apparatus for securing oil companies by curbing the influence of Saudi radical religious parties. Losing these oil companies would have been catastrophic for the American economy. Thus, one purpose of American television was to push back against the extremist Saudis or at least contain their fundamentalist rhetoric and radical proclivity. It can be argued that American pop culture participated in the successful stabilization of the reciprocal economic interests of both the U.S. and Saudi Arabia. American pop culture entered millions of Saudi homes and ended up serving both nations.

Furthermore, Satellite television became a means to mould a more globally cultured and modernized Saudi youth. But its biggest contribution was shaping a Saudi generation that will always stand with its government against radical dogmas. Emma C. Murphy, a scholar of political economy on the Middle East, states:

An Arab satellite system (Arabsat) existed by the mid-1980s, but was not used as a direct broadcast medium. Satellite television viewing was limited to a few, wealthy individuals with dishes which could receive signals from an outdated Soviet satellite. This changed with the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, when regional allies of the US-led coalition realised that their own populations were vulnerable to propaganda beamed at them by Iraqi television. To counter this, Saudi Arabia began installing hardware close to the borders which allowed the American news channel CNN to be downloaded and rebroadcast (after some editing) via terrestrial means. (1070)

The Arabsat allowed Saudis to witness the impact of the American military during the Gulf War. Eventually, Saudis were left with more shows to entertain them and influence their uprising. Ten years later, satellite television became a necessity in almost every Saudi house. It was affordable and easy to install. Satellite television was used as a way of creating a moderate generation who questioned radical beliefs and tendencies.

The television war has always been between the Saudi government and radical religious groups. Acknowledging television's rapid influence on its nation, the Saudi government seized the opportunity to own as many satellite channels as possible. Fandy points that "[t]o combat the opposition's media war outside the kingdom, the Saudi government either directly or indirectly has purchased major media outlets in different world capitals. Currently, Saudi Arabia dominates the Arabic visual and print media" (140). Even though Saudi satellite television censors its content, it still views American films and shows. For instance, among MBC's 18 channels are some in English with subtitles in Arabic, such as MBC 2, MBC 4, MBC Action, and MBC Max. "MBC TV's programming lineup includes movies, soap operas, cultural programs, news, public affairs, live coverage of local and national elections and community events, sports, science, children's shows, family entertainment, and how-to programs" (Allied Media Corp). Every channel has its own website and among their television programs are fully American shows. For example, MBC 4 is concerned with television shows and series such as *America's Got Talent*, *American Idol*, *Oprah*, *Friends*, *So You Think You Can Dance*, *The Late Show with David Letterman*, *Two and a Half Men*, *The Talk*, *The Doctors*, *Dr Oz*, *The Vampire Diaries*, and *Ringer* (MBC4). Other MBC channels in English broadcast sitcoms, series, and films such as *Knocked Up*, *Hellboy*, *Hawaii Five-0*, and *Human Target*.

In 1996, the Saudis encountered a different experience with American television that was introduced by subscribed broadcasting networks such as Orbit TV and Showtime Arabia. In 2009, these two companies merged into the Orbit Showtime Network (OSN). Those who could afford a subscription were offered uncensored American films and shows. But most interestingly, they had access to American daily shows and more. On OSN's website, we read the following:

Watch the most talked-about award-winning series from the US and UK with the latest seasons of the hottest shows including *CSI*, *Desperate Housewives*, *Entourage*, *Ugly Betty*, *Glee*, *True Blood*, *Lost*, *Grey's Anatomy*, *Modern Family* and many more. A plethora of comedy awaits you with a world class

line-up of talk shows including The Jay Leno Show, The Ellen DeGeneres Show and The Daily Show with Jon Stewart. (OSN)

Ironically, OSN mentions UK shows among the award-winning series they provide, but all of the examples they list are American shows. Unlike many Americans today, who know about Saudis through Fox and CNN, Saudis know more about American pop culture through following daily updates of what American television broadcasts.

Neocolonizing the Nation

The question is: how much of Saudi culture can be categorized as a product of American popular culture? Is it possible that American television has been shaping and reshaping Saudi culture since 1957? The only resistance that the Saudi government could not overcome during the twentieth century and up to 2018 was religious parties' opposition to movie theaters. This is because fundamentalist groups believe in and enforce gender segregation. Nonetheless, the theater found an alternative way to Saudis' home. In March 2011, OSN came up with the idea to provide Hollywood movies as soon as they premiered in theaters. They added an on-demand service under the name "Saudi Home Cinema," which costs about \$35 (OSN). As of today, and as a part of the Saudi Arabian Vision 2030, the ban on theaters was lifted in March, 2018.

Let us not underestimate the influence of the Internet and its various windows into American pop culture. With the digital revolution in Saudi Arabia, despite censorship, Saudis are able to view American shows on YouTube and other streaming networks. For example, on January 6th, 2016, Netflix was launched in the Middle East and within the first two months of its service in Saudi Arabia, people were talking *Breaking Bad* and catching up with *The Walking Dead*.

Currently, American television is in almost every house in Saudi Arabia. American television shows, for instance, can be seen on free cable and satellite television channels or on paid ones. Therefore, the majority of Saudi people are, in one way or another, exposed to American culture. This is the American cultural imperialism that was introduced in 1957—as much as it imposed itself, its neocolonial tendencies helped in bringing down the dogmas of radical religious groups. Eventually, allowing American television inside Saudi homes may have contributed to adopting a more moderate perspective through which Saudi people perceive themselves and the world.

Therefore, unlike fundamentalist groups, Saudi people embrace America not only as an ally, but also as a culture. Consequently, the introduction of television and

its development may be considered as an implicit attempt to fight radical religious groups. This is a way to redefine, deconstruct and moderate the concept of jihad:

[In the late-eighteenth century and] within the Saud-Wahhab alliance, a working relationship was established in which Mohammed bin Saud committed himself to a Jihad, or hold war, on behalf of the Wahhabi revivalist objectives; in return Mohammed Saud was recognised as imam of the true faith and secular leader of the movement. The Saud and Wahhabi alliance formed in the eighteenth century has undergone many vicissitudes but it remains the basis of the dynasty that rules Saudi Arabia today. (McHale 624)

McHale's view is misinformed about today's Saudi government, and he is oblivious to see how the government was able to reverse cold jihad against radical citizens. Therefore, it can be said that the modern Saudi television is used as a source of cold jihad against radical Saudis. Benjamin R. Barber affirms that "Jihad not only revolts against but abets McWorld, while McWorld not only imperils but re-creates and reinforces Jihad" (5).¹ As a result of recreating and reinforcing a new type of jihad, television is now able to change the ethos of the nation through endorsing American popular culture.

The question to be asked today is: how much did American popular culture change some Saudis' lives? From a cultural perspective, the new Saudi generation has been reconstructed to be inclusive of other worlds, particularly the West. Today's Saudi citizens are very much influenced by American popular culture as a result of being exposed to it for more than five decades. Unfortunately, few scholarly writings have been published on how Saudi youth are being influenced by American popular culture. Yet, today's digital media websites such as YouTube can be taken as evidence of what the Saudi youth is producing. For instance, one can watch the first season of *Arabs Got Talent* (2011) and see many Arab rappers, among whom are three Saudis.

Some Saudis are not only becoming rappers but are also looking forward to what American culture has to offer. Simply put, the U.S. has always been looked at by some Saudis as utopia. As a result of the American imperialist culture, Saudis drive Fords, eat Burger King, drink Coke, and catch up on *The Daily Show* or The

1 Barber identifies the storyteller of the McWorld later in his book as being Hollywood. It "inoculates secularism, passivity, consumerism, vicariousness, impulse buying and an accelerated pace of life, not as a result of its overt themes and explicit story-lines but by virtue of what Hollywood is and how its products are consumed" (97).

Colbert Report. On the contrary, the image of Saudis in the U.S. today is distorted by attaching it to terrorism, practiced by radical religious groups living outside Saudi Arabia. Perhaps, Saudi channels need to compete with American networks and challenge such inaccurate images about its people.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the oil boom brought television to the Saudis, and Saudi oil worked as a fuel for American popular culture. However, it was television that played the diplomatic role and channeled reciprocal economic interests. What I have been trying to communicate throughout this paper is how the Saudi culture of today was influenced by the U.S. as an imperialist culture. To further elucidate the Saudi culture of today, I will conclude with the words of Raymond Williams and his views on understanding the structure of feeling. The Saudi structure of feeling “is in it that communication depends” and it is difficult to learn as generations change over time (37). It is “the culture of a period” (36). In other words, it is best understood by the contemporaries and less by their successors. This will result in shaping a new structure of feelings toward the previous generation’s culture. In trying to understand the whole of Saudi society, it can be helpful for us to understand that their actual life is what the “whole organization is there to express” (37). The structure of feeling can be traced in documentaries since “it expresses that life to us in direct terms, when the living witnesses are silent” (37). American popular shows and films were and still are very influential in altering the Saudi structure of feeling. Part of the Saudis’ documentaries are media productions. Watching Saudis’ media productions these days can help us understand their structure of feeling. Looking closely at what Saudi culture and its television productions are these days, one comes to realize that Saudi culture and television have been imperialized by American television. As a result, it can be argued that it is American shows and films that were able to alter the lives of the Saudi people by offering a window to the Western world and the promises of modernity, which in turn ruptured the ties with Jihadist doctrines.

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