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Professionalism vs. Popularity:

The Shift in Ethics of Interviewing in Arab Media

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Abstract:

This paper examines recent changes that have occurred in broadcast interviews in the Arab world, particularly in the Saudi context. Many previous studies have pointed out that interviewers ought to adhere to strict standards relating to neutrality and professionalism. These include withholding their own personal opinions, using impersonal expressions when delivering criticisms, giving guests sufficient opportunity to reply to questions, and similar strategies that have been examined. However, this study shows that some Arab interviewers have begun to adopt new strategies that ignore the traditional turn-taking in media interviews, using a very relaxed system of turn-taking, which is new to Arab audiences. This new environment allows activities that do not normally appear in Arab traditional shows, such as using taboo words and offensive language, showing overt racism towards their guests and drawing audiences outside the studio into the conflict. This shift has led to higher viewing figures for these shows in the contemporary market-oriented mediascape, even though they fail to respect core ethical standards.

Keywords: Arab Interviews; Conversation Analysis; Media Ethics; Racism; Sociolinguistics; Taboo Words; Turn-Taking

Résumé:

Cet article examine les récents changements qui se sont produits dans les interviews de radiodiffusion au sein du monde arabe, en particulier dans le contexte saoudien. De nombreuses études antérieures ont souligné que les intervieweurs devaient respecter des normes strictes en matière de neutralité et de professionnalisme. Entre autre, il s'agit notamment de refuser leurs propres opinions personnelles, d'utilisant des expressions impersonnelles lors de la délivrance des critiques, de donner aux invités suffisamment de temps pour répondre aux questions, ainsi que des stratégies similaires ayant été examinés. Cependant, cette étude montre que certains intervieweurs arabes ont commencé à adopter de nouvelles stratégies ignorant la prise de pouvoir traditionnelle dans les entrevues avec les médias en utilisant un système très détendu de turn-taking, ce qui est nouveau pour le public arabe. Ce nouvel environnement permet des activités n'apparaissant pas normalement dans les émissions traditionnels arabes, comme l'utilisation de mots tabous et de langage offensif, montrant un racisme manifeste envers leurs invités et attirant l'audience, à l'extérieur du studio, au conflit. Ce changement a entraîné une hausse du nombre de spectateurs de ces émissions et ce, dans le paysage médiatique contemporain axé sur le marché, même s'ils ne respectent pas les normes éthiques fondamentales.

Mots-clés: Analyse de conversation; Éthique des médias; Interviews arabes; Mots tabous; Racisme; Sociolinguistique; Tournage

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Introduction

Turn-taking in political and news interviews has been a subject of key interest in media talk and conversation analysis (CA) research. Several studies have pointed out that the turn-taking in these settings follows a very strict system that usually only allows interviewers (IRs) to ask questions or produce statements that lead to questions, while interviewees (IEs), on the other hand, are only expected to reply to these (e.g., Clayman & Heritage, 2002a; Greatbatch, 1988; Heritage, Clayman & Zimmerman, 1988; Hutchby, 2006). In these settings IRs are also expected to be unbiased and neutral in their interaction with their guests, and withhold even small actions that typically occur in everyday conversation, such as agreeing with their guests (e.g., "true"), or being surprised (e.g., "oh!") (e.g., Clayman, 1988, 2002; Clayman & Heritage, 2002a; Greatbatch, 1988; Heritage, 1985). It goes without saying that absolute neutrality cannot be achieved in media talk, but analysis of CA has identified certain techniques that can help IRs maintain their naturalistic stance. For instance, pre-statements that normally appear in an IR's turns before raising a question can be produced in a way that does not represent their views, but rather are attributed to a third party that can be another person, group, or even anonymous source (e.g., Clayman, 2002; Clayman & Heritage, 2002a; Rendle-Short, 2007). In this way, IRs are not seen as challenging guests with their own views, but rather as remaining unbiased and keeping their turn within an impersonal interaction. The term "news interviews" has been widely used in

these CA studies, but it is important to indicate here that the term does not refer merely to interviews that appear incidentally on news bulletins, but includes programs that deal with current affairs, such as NBC's *Meet the Press*, CBS' *Face the Nation*, and ABC's *This Week* (e.g., Clayman & Heritage, 2002a; Montgomery, 2010).

Against this background, more recently, attention has been paid to examining hybrid interviews that differ from the mainstream political and news interviews. Ekström (2011) examined the use of hybrid forms in Swedish political interviews shows, defining these as a mix between informal and humorous talk with serious accountability interviewing. In this case, interviews are not used for entertainment, which normally involve a relaxed environment, but rather they are used to challenge and criticize the guests, putting them in an often uncomfortable situation. Hutchby (2011a; 2011b) examined political hybrid interviews that combine the news interview format with clearly biased reporting. He pointed out that news IRs developed their practices over the course of the 20th century and, as Schudson (1994) notes, they transformed themselves from journalist-as-chronicler into journalist-as-investigator. A new style of interviewing, however, has emerged more recently, evincing a shift in their practices from the role of investigative journalist to that of journalist-as-advocate or inquisitor. Hutchby looked at the system of turn-taking in an American program, *The O'Reilly Factor*, which runs on Fox News Channel, and found that IRs tended to reveal their own opinions, pass judgment on guests' answers, and engage in behaviour towards them that was aggressive, mocking, or even insulting. Of course, these strategies ignore traditional media ethics that expect IRs to adopt a stance that is as neutral and objective as possible. Similar examples of mixing news with entertainment have been also found in some other countries, for example, Greece (Patrona, 2011) and India (Thussu, 2007), and this movement towards "infotainment" reflected in personalizing the news and formal interviews has been explained as partly due to the influence of business interests and corporate policy (e.g., Meehan, 2005; Thussu, 2007).

Arab Broadcast Interviews

Most of these previous studies have focused on media interviews conducted in several cultures, particularly in Anglo-American culture, whereas not many studies have been conducted on talk shows and media interviews in Arabic-speaking cultures. Generally speaking, the content of media interviews in the Arabic-speaking world has been examined in a number of studies (e.g., Ayish, 2005; Sakr, 2007), but little attention has been paid to the format of these interviews and talk shows. Recently however, Alfahad (2013) conducted a study on the format of Arabic formal interviews that appeared in 2009 and 2010 in two Arabic news channels, the Saudi state-owned channel "al-Ekhbariya" and the more independent channel "al-Arabiya". The interviews were taken from several programs, which include *Iḍāʾāt*, *Wājih al-Ṣaḥāfah*, *Bi al-ʿArabī*, *al-Qarār*, *al-Majlis*, and *al-Madār*. The study found that Arab IRs do apply the system of turn-taking suggested in previous CA studies, but operate on slightly a more relaxed system, such as elaborating in greeting, using continuer actions (e.g., "yeah", "mem hm", "uh huh"), and overtly agreeing with their guests.

One of the programs examined in that study, *Wājih al-Ṣaḥāfah* (Face the Press), was presented by Dawud al-Shiryan. The show initially interviewed prominent Arab politicians; its format was similar to that of the American NBC show *Meet the Press* in which the IR is joined by a number of other journalists who all pose challenging questions to the guest. Later, however, the program relied only on al-Shiryan's questions, and the topics discussed on the program began

to focus on more local Saudi issues. In 2012, the program was cancelled, and al-Shiryan started a new program titled *al-Thaminah* (at Eighth) on MBC channel, a sister of al-Arabiya, that tends to be more entertainment-driven. The new show continued to host Saudi officials and representatives of governmental agencies to discuss local issues and current social affairs, and although both these programs have hosted Saudi officials, *Wājih al-Ṣaḥāfah* more closely followed the usual principles of news interviews widely discussed by conversation analysts.

This short introduction to changing media practices provides the backdrop to this study that will examine the new trend in Arab media from a wider perspective. It will explore some of the challenges to ethical standards posed by this new development in journalistic practices that appeared in the new program. The analysis begins by outlining the data and methodology, before moving on to present the discussion and findings.

Data and Methodology

The data used for this study[1] is drawn from a large number of episodes of *al-Thaminah*, which has been broadcast since 2012 on MBC channel at eight o'clock every weekday. The presenter, Dawud al-Shiryan, hosts various guests including government ministers, deputy ministers, representatives of governmental agencies, public figures, or sometimes ordinary citizens who are in some way connected to current affairs or social issues of relevance to Saudi society.

The show has been selected for analysis because the host employs new strategies unlike the traditional practices seen on other talk shows. The IR plays more of an advocate role rather than being very restricted to any commitment to objectivity and impartiality required in broadcast interviews. Moreover, this show has become massively popular in Saudi society since its launch in 2012. According to media ratings (al-Yusi, 2012), some episodes of this program have overtaken the viewing numbers for the most Arab popular entertainment shows, such as *Arabs Got Talent* and *Arab Idol*, even though the program is merely a talk show that focuses on local Saudi issues.

The current study relies on the approach of CA, which focuses on the interactions that occur in these interviews. Since its appearance in the 1960s, the school of CA has attempted to reveal the system that people use in structuring their conversations and dialogues. CA is not only interested in everyday interactions as its name might indicate, but also in those that occur in more formal contexts, such as classroom interaction, interrogation, and media interviews. Today, after several decades of research and analysis, a large number of studies have examined how people interact in media contexts, and the strategies they use in interviews, talk shows, and debates. Many researchers in CA have obtained important findings that have provided insights into the systems that operate within these settings, regulating turn-taking, and the ways of opening and closing interviews, introducing and addressing guests in media interaction. Other advantages of this approach are that it focuses closely on details of turn-taking in the interaction, relies on an example-by-example basis, and uses the format of participants' talk to examine how they talk and exchange turns rather than concentrating on what they talk about (Schegloff, 2007). CA also differs from other approaches in the method employed to transcribe spoken data as it attempts to present the data as closely as possible to the original recordings (Jefferson, 2004), giving others the chance to verify the claims made by the analyst. Some of the transcripts, however, have been simplified here for ease of presentation.

Discussion

As explained in the introduction, participants in formal interviews withhold various actions that would normally occur in everyday conversations. It has been suggested that the reason for withholding these actions in broadcast interviews is that IRs act as a mediator between the guest and the members of audience, treating the IE's talk as if he/she was talking to the overhearing audience through the IR, rather than acting as primary recipients of the IE's talk (e.g., Clayman & Heritage, 2002a; Clayman, 2002). This tends to keep the interaction formal and away from personal conversation.

Nevertheless, the IR in *al-Thāminah* acts overtly as a primary recipient of his guests' talk, and data presented below shows that the IR is not only producing continuer's actions or an overt agreement that are found in some Arabic traditional interviews (Alfahad, 2013), but he also abandons question/answer turn-taking by overtly disagreeing with his guests, and arguing or even mocking them. The example below illustrates how the system of the interaction in the show moves into confrontational mode in which the IR produces interventions that cannot be categorized as questions or pre-statements, but are argumentative or sarcastically critical of his guest. The IE in the following example is Mr. Saied Kadsah, who is the chief engineer and representative for the Ministry of Rural and Municipal Affairs. One of the criticisms levelled at the Ministry is the lack of proper urban planning, and the discussion in the coming extract concerns the wedding venues that are built near residential areas, which are a nuisance for residents because of the large number of wedding guests and their cars.

Extract 1, MBC, *al-Thaminah*, 12/07/2012, IR: Dawud al-Shiryan, IE: Saied Kadsah

1 IE: firstly I said to you that the venue has to be compatible with
2 planning regulations [it has to comply]
3 IR: [pshaw, see here:] what nice words
4 Saied WHAT planning standards for GOD's sake (.) I
5 SWEAR to God our areas—look at our houses people started to
6 complain that the wedding venues were right beside their
7 houses

When the IE (line 1) attempts to assure the IR that the Ministry has planning regulations that every building must comply with, the IR starts his turn with the sound "*Tsa*, pshaw". In Arabic, the sound used to express contempt or impatience or even anger about someone's behaviour. The IR's use of this intervention indicates that the IR does not withhold practices that typically occur in everyday conversation. The IR also mocked his guest (line 3) with "*yā zīn ḥatsyik yā Saᶜīd*, what nice words Saied", and then produced a rhetorical question (line 4) "*MAᶜĀyīr takhṭīṭiyah aysh ALLĀH yardā 3alīk*, WHAT planning standards for GOD's sake", which does not actually expect an answer, but rather is delivered as an admonishment or reprimand for the answer given by the guest. Moreover, using merely the first name to address his guests in this extract and extract six "Saied" and "Hussain" is also not commonly used in traditional broadcast interviews. Guests are normally addressed formally with titles, depending on their educational, professional qualifications or social status (e.g., Shaykh, Doctor and Ustādh) (Alfahad, 2013; 2015b). This again shows how the IR abandons the usual system of turn-taking in Arab media interviews, and

attempts to personalize the interaction. It can be also noted that the IR does not simply provide personal statements (lines 4-5), but also confirms these statement by swearing to Allah/God "*WA ALLĀH al-ᶜaẓīm . . . al-nās bidat tishtikī*, I SWEAR to God . . . people started to complain", which indicates that the IR is being strongly opinionated and taking a side in the argument, rather than maintaining the usual interview turn-taking.

The IR could challenge his guest with a follow-up question or a statement that contradicts his guest's answer to be more neutral. He could say for instance "Are the regulations being implemented? Residents are complaining about the fact that the wedding venues are right beside their houses". This would maintain his neutral stance and keep the interaction more impersonal. However, on the contrary, the IR rejects the usual conventions relating to question/answer turn-taking by choosing to criticize the answer given, mocking his guest and failing to use address terms that show deference and respect in mainstream interviews.

Al-Shiryān was once interviewed and asked why he uses in his new show a level of language that has not been seen in other Saudi talk shows, and he replied by stating "I want to talk naturally, when I talk on the program I want to forget that I am on the TV. When I talk I want talk like I am at home with my family, friends, and my work colleagues" (Li-lḥiwār Baqīyah, 2012). This strategy of "talking naturally" has an impact on the neutral stance and the principles that journalists are normally required to maintain in this setting. Although the IR uses the normal question-answer system of turn-taking commonly used in broadcast interviews, he also combines these turns with personal activities that would normally occur in everyday conversation, where participants "talk naturally" and are freely allowed to produce actions that are not normally allowed in institutional settings.

My previous work has examined aggressiveness in *al-Thaminah* (Alfahad, 2015b) in more detail, and showed that the IR employed frequent interruptions, imperative sentences, not allowing guests the opportunity to reply to questions, and addressing them in an informal way. As Clayman stated "aggressive journalists are particularly vulnerable to the charge of having gone beyond the bounds of professionalism or propriety" (2002: 197). Indeed, this new aggressive style together with the very relaxed system of turn-taking is more likely to allow actions that violate media ethics to appear. The following sections will discuss three ethical issues that have emerged in Arabic media interviews with this new environment, by using concrete examples to illustrate their usage during interaction.

Vulgarity and Taboo Words

Swearing and offensive language has been examined in English linguistic studies from a range of approaches including historical perspectives (Hughes, 1999), lexical varieties (Sheidlower, 1995), some psycholinguistic situations (Jay, 1992), and live media broadcasts (Butler & Fitzgerald, 2011). In contrast, much less attention has been paid to the use of bad language in Arabic discourse, especially in media interviews. This lack of research can be linked to the fact that media interviews and talk shows have not previously generated much data on this topic. Traditionally, IRs have attempted to appear as neutral and professional as possible in front of their audiences, keeping to the role of asking questions and attempting to demonstrate a lack of bias in their interaction with their guests, which reflects the media strict policy and censorship.

However, if we consider the language used by the host on *al-Thaminah*, this clearly does not resemble that used on other Saudi programs that host Saudi officials and well-known figures. Firstly, al-Shairyan tends to use his own Saudi dialect, rather than Modern Standard Arabic

(MSA), more commonly used in the media and generally regarded as the more prestigious linguistic variety. This code switching from MSA to a dialectal form could be viewed as an attempt to promote a more relaxed form of communication between the host and guests. However, al-Shairyan does not use this strategy to be friendly towards his guests, closing the distance between them and himself as host. Rather, he uses it as a form of aggression, employing lexical terms that would not normally be considered ethical in the Arab media context. For instance, in the following extract, the IR describes the support offered by Saudi banks to charities using a Saudi Arabic term meaning "the pits". The word is (*zift*), and it literally means "pitch", a slang word used to describe things as really bad.

Extract 2, MBC, *al-Thaminah*, 03/02/2013, IR: Dawud al-Shiryan

1 IR: the reputation of Saudi banks in supporting charities really is
2 the pits

In another example, he ridicules the comparison between the size of Saudi Arabia and the UK made by his guest, Dr. Jabir Sharahili, the assistant director of the Food Safety Program in the Ministry of Health, by using an insulting slang expression "*nakil tibin*", which literally means to "eat hay" typically used to tell someone to shut up:

Extract 3, MBC, *al-Thaminah*, 18/05/2013, IR: Dawud al-Shiryan, IE: Dr. Jabir Sharahili

1 IR: so there are more restaurants in Riyadh than in London?
2 IE: just a minute
3 IR: wait, answer the question, you are comparing Saudi Arabia to
4 Britain in terms of size and you want us to keep quiet and
5 "eat hay"

Similar words and expressions that would be classified as vulgar slang are found regularly in other situations and contexts on the show to criticize the governmental agencies, expressions that Saudis would not normally hear in media interviews. However, taboo words also appear in the show, such as using "*al-laʿn*, curse or damn" during interviews. Muslims and Arabs are generally brought up not to use this word, even in daily and personal conversations, as it is regarded simply to be taboo. Interestingly, however, the host occasionally uses this expression in front of millions of viewers, and in the extracts below, the IR uses the word when describing the public reaction of the Ministry of Health in relation to the mass media's treatment of a case involving a patient. The host stated:

Extract 4, MBC, *al-Thaminah*, 8/10/2013, IR: Dawud al-Shiryan

1 IR: I have read your statement, you really damned the media for
2 their involvement.

The Ministry of Health, which the IE represents, issued a statement that criticized mass media for several issues, such as not having enough evidence in reporting the patient's case. The host though did not describe that statement as "you criticized media", but rather "*laʿntum jidaf al-iʿlām,* you really damned the media".

In another context, in a discussion concerning a fatal car accident involving female teachers, the host damned the fact that they were forced to travel long distances to make a living "*Allāh yalʿan al-ḥājih,* God damns the necessity".

Extract 5, MBC, *al-Thaminah*, 24/09/2012, IR: Dawud al-Shiryan

1 IR: They were trying to make a living, God damns the necessity for
2 them to die on the road

In sum, previous CA studies have pointed out that IRs should not express their opinion or take sides in the discussion if they wish to be seen as neutral. It was noted in the introduction that a new global media trend "infotainment" has emerged with some channels now allowing IRs to overtly express their own personal views. However, this section has shown that these changes that came with the new system of turn-taking did not allow merely IRs to express their own views, but also to produce an unfamiliar level of language, compared to other traditional Arab shows examined previously in Alfahad (2013). Thus, when describing the performance of the Saudi governmental agencies, the IR could have avoided terms of "curse" that do not appear on mainstream broadcast interviews. When used by IRs, such terms might increase the notoriety of the program together with its viewing figures. This can be compared to a similar literary phenomenon that has led to some Arab novels gaining popularity not because of their level of literary creativity, but due to their inclusion of taboo language and topics (Berrada, 2011).

Overt Racism

Objectivity, professionalism and neutrality are ethical values that media institutions attempt to apply to their production standards. Even though these values cannot be absolutely guaranteed, media institutions still try to observe them and respect them in order to present a positive image to their audiences. However, regardless of their attempts to represent objectivity and impartiality, some discourse studies have highlighted the role that the mass media can play in disseminating racism and intolerance within societies, reaching places that could not be reached without mass media. According to van Dijk (2000), racism is a social act that is often present in our daily lives and personal experiences, but it can also be spread when it is embedded in public discourse via media forms such as newspapers, news channels, and movies that can reach a mass audience. When mass media spread racist discourse beyond the limits of daily conversation to the public domain, the issue becomes potentially much more powerful and more damaging.

Previous studies that have dealt with racism in media refer to two forms: overt and covert. The older forms of racism described by Barker (1981) appear overt in comparison to the more covert racism that has started to appear more recently in the media context, racism that goes unnoticed at first glance and must be exposed by more detailed analyses. Racism can hide within different structures and types of discourse, such as ascribing positive or negative meanings to the other depending on whether they belong to our group or not (e.g., terrorist versus freedom fighter), or associating certain groups with positive issues whilst associating

others with negative topics. Racism can also appear in strategies used by IRs, such as allowing more airtime for those whose opinions we support whilst interrupting others and minimizing their opportunities to talk. It can even appear in the way in which some words are pronounced or stressed, or be present at the level of syntactical structures that can be used to conceal or expose the identity of the subject in news headlines (e.g., a man was killed, a Muslim kills) (van Dijk, 2002). The latter has been studied from a discourse analysis perspective. However, if we look at other media approaches, this issue has been examined through the lenses of other theories. Agenda-setting theory, for instance, shows how the media decide what we should know about the world by selecting specific topics and ignoring others (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). As Cohen stated about the press: "it may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling readers what to think about" (1963: 13). Strategies of this type and others can be used by the media to create bias towards some groups to the exclusion of others in a way that cannot be easily recognized by the audience.

Ironically, the examples of racism that appeared on *al-Thaminah* are not of the covert kind and do not require an in-depth analysis to expose them. On the contrary, they are overt and easily noticed. Let us consider for instance the following example taken from a call-in on the program featuring Dr. Hussain Othman, the head of the international private colleges. The guest comments on various accusations made against his institution, including the closure of some colleges by a regulatory body, which resulted in difficulties for many students. Before examining this extract, it is important to mention that making negative references to foreigners in Saudi Arabia and ridiculing them is common practice in the show. The IR has even been known to call for all of them to be dismissed from their jobs, on the grounds that they are the cause of most of the Kingdom's economic problems. The following example is striking because the IR is racist towards an individual who is actually a Saudi citizen. First, he raises doubts about the guest's nationality, and then claims he had been deported due to medical malpractice in his previous job. The guest denied all the IR's allegations, insisting that he has Saudi citizenship. Again, the extract below from the interview does not feature any of the conventional question-answer sequences used in traditional Arab talk shows, but becomes an aggressive monologue by al-Shiryan that has a very unusual ending:

Extract 6, MBC, *al-Thaminah*, 07/10/2012, IR: Dawud al-Shiryan, IE: Dr. Hussain Othman

1 IE: do not talk about this do not talk about this, mate, talk about
2 the office talk about *ishi* [*ishi*]
3 IR: [*ishi*] *ma ishi* Hussain, the *ishi* is to
4 deny now that you committed violations and were deported
5 from the country, you do not believe me? You want me to bring
6 the evidence I will bring it, you built colleges that were the pits
7 all the college buildings you built are bad
8 IE: your reputation, you destroy reputations I have never I have
9 never ever been deported
10 IR: you were deported despite what you say, get rid of this pikey's
11 voice, get rid of this pikey's voice I am not listening, get him
12 off air

In this short extract, there are a number of interesting issues that contravene the normal system of media interviews. For instance, the IR directs his anger at his guest, mocking and cutting off his call (lines 10-12), providing personal statements, for example: "all the college buildings you built are bad" (line 7), as well as using words that are not commonly used in media discourse, such as "the pits" (line 6) as previously discussed. Focusing more on the main issue discussed in this section, there is an overt example of racist discourse by the IR, when he refers to his guest twice (lines 10, 11) as "*ghajarī,* pikey or gypsy". The guest is a Saudi citizen, but the host make attempts to convince the audience that he is not, drawing attention in line (3) to a non-Saudi Arabic expression used by the guest by repeating this three times *"ishi"*, which literately means "the thing". By highlighting this word, the host appears to be supporting his opinion stated earlier that the guest does not belong to Saudi Arabia and was deported some time ago. The IR goes further (lines 10-12) by calling his guest "gypsy", an insulting term which suggests that those who gain Saudi citizenship rather than being born in the Kingdom are second-class citizens. The status of the IE's citizenship and the ethnic group to which he belongs have nothing to do with the issue being discussed on the show, namely, the problems caused by the closure of some colleges. Even if the IE was not Saudi, the law courts are responsible for resolving such issues, regardless of people's ethnicity or nationality.

Such racist discourse does occur in some private and daily conversations, but it becomes more potentially damaging when it is used in public discourse and directly delivered to a large audience. These practices of offensive and racist language, however, do not merely reflect the IR's intention, otherwise the show would not continue, or the channel would apologize for such practices. Although al-Shiryan's words caused controversy in Saudi society for a while, no apology or clarification was issued by the channel stating that such actions were not in line with its policy. This can be interpreted as a tacit agreement with these violations because they raise the profile of the show, and contribute to its popularity and that of the channel.

Taking Arguments out of the Studio

A number of recent studies have noted that media IRs and journalists have become more aggressive with their guests overtime (e.g., Clayman et al., 2006, 2007; Clayman & Heritage, 2002a). It was found, for instance, that journalists used strategies that increased the pressure on politicians, such as frequently using follow-up questions to probe the content of the IE's answer rather than opening up a new topic. They also increasingly use strategies such as direct and close-ended questions as well as delivering statements that are critical of the guests themselves or of the institutions to which they belong. Recently, I used Clayman and Heritage's (2002a) framework to compare the aggressiveness embedded in the questions posed by Arab IRs in two different channels; a governmental news channel, and a more independent news channel (Alfahad, 2015a). The study showed that interviews on media that are not controlled by the government do not only cover a broader range of topics and issues, as some Arab media studies have pointed out (e.g., Ayish, 2011; Lynch, 2006; Sakr, 2007). They also give greater space for IRs to put more pressure on their guests, and use more adversarial strategies by criticizing them and not accepting easily the answers given. The recent changes in Arab media interviews then are not limited to new topics and content, but in addition, the new independent channels have introduced a new format not previously seen on government channels.

If we go back and consider the interaction in *al-Thaminah* show, extracts 1 and 6 showed some features of aggressiveness that do not normally appear in traditional Arab talk shows. This

new aggressive style of interviewing can be a possible explanation behind the popularity of the show. According to Clayman and Heritage (2002a) audiences prefer IRs who tends to be more aggressive and critical towards guests, exemplified by Jeremy Paxman and John Humphrys, and this eventually helps IRs to become more popular in their society.

Nevertheless, the IR does not merely antagonize his guests by being aggressive and critical, but actually extends this attitude to cover individuals that are not even present on the show. The IR occasionally breaks off from the question-answer turns with his guests to turn to the camera and directly addresses the audience with criticism applying to other people/institutions that are not on the discussion table. To clarify this point, let us consider the following example that is part of a program focusing on the topic of young Saudi jihadists traveling to countries where there is conflict and war, and the impact of this on Saudi society. The program guests included some Saudi officials as well as a mother (Umm Muhammed) whose son went to Syria to fight before he turned 17. In the following extract, the IR suspended the interview and looked into the camera as though directly addressing the audience:

Extract 7, MBC, *al-Thaminah*, 19/01/2014, IR: Dawud al-Shiryan

1 IR: when shaykh Salih al-Fouzan states that it is a place of
2 persecution al-Awdah, al-Arifi, al-Buraik and al-Awaji were all
3 silent, those ones who I already named, al-Awdah, al-Arifi and
4 al-Awaji, beat about the bush, they remain quiet, they do not
5 talk, Umm Muhammed is cursing them because of her son, you
6 are Twitter heroes who deceived our sons and let them go to
7 Jihad, you are responsible and society has to question you, you
8 those ones I already mentioned by name, you have deceived our
9 sons since the war in Afghanistan, you have encouraged them
10 and got them killed in wars that ended without anyone knowing
11 who started or ended them

The host then clearly accused a number of prominent Muslim clerics in Saudi society, namely, al-Awdah, al-Arifi, al-Buraik, and al-Awaji, for encouraging young people to go to places of conflict in the Islamic world, letting Umm Muhammed's son go to Syria to fight despite his youth, and also being responsible for the deaths of many other young Saudis killed in foreign conflicts. These overt accusations aimed directly at these high-profile Saudi Muslim clerics (Al-Arifi and al-Awdah for instance, have some 15 million and some 10 million followers respectively on Twitter), has created a huge ongoing debate on the social media network and other channels.

When interviewed about these accusations, Al-Arifi responded: "I do not watch *al-Thaminah* and I have never met Dawud al-Shiryan, I do not care about what he said motivated by envy and personal resentment. He lied about what he said about me; how can he pretend to advise when he uses such offensive language?" (al-Barqaui, 2014). Al-Awdah posted the following on his Twitter account: "My brother Dawud, my intention is to prevent people from going to Syria and elsewhere. You need to apologize publicly, to prove this, or be ready to go to court". This was not the first incident involving al-Awdah since the Saudi newspaper *al-Watan* published a front-page story concerning the fact that al-Awdah's son had become a jihadi and his father was worried about him. The newspaper commented on this paradox and ridiculed his

reaction. When the matter went to trial, the court ruled against the newspaper, ordering it to pay financial compensation to al-Awdah, and publishing a front-page apology (Otaif, 2010). Interestingly, however, the process of suing the newspaper took five years to reach a final decision, demonstrating the length of time required to deal with such accusations.

The IR, then, did not only violate the principles of neutrality by giving a personal opinion and judgment on his guest's stance, an issue that has been previously discussed in the studies mentioned in the introduction. This is now a new strategy that entails making allegations and accusations that cannot be resolved without a court hearing. Selecting prominent individuals with a strong following in society puts the show into the spotlight for a while, not as a result of the interesting topics it discusses or the IR's aggressive behaviour towards his guests, but because these overt accusations take this personal conflict out of the confines of the studio by involving individuals who are not participating in the show, and takes the debate out into the wider public domain.

Conclusion

The previous sections identified three features that were found in the Saudi talk show *al-Thaminah*, namely, the use of offensive words, the adoption of an overtly racist stance, and making accusations relating to individuals not participating in the show itself. All of these features highlight two main concerns: first, they violated the generally accepted ethical principles of professionalism, and secondly, they created a stir in Saudi society for a while. The changes noted here also go beyond the findings of previous studies that have examined turn-taking systems in broadcast interviews in other societies and concluded that the "infotainment" approach has led to a less restricted scope for IRs. Our findings show that the Arab IR featured here, Dawud al-Shiryan, did not use this new freedom to only personalize the interaction as is usually the case with "infotainment", but instead went beyond that by violating traditional media ethics.

If the ethical standards and principles underpinning media are intended to support impartiality and objectivity, currently we appear to be witnessing a new trend that seems to be influenced by commercial pressures, to the extent that media competition now means pandering to audience preferences as increasing viewer numbers has become all important. "Infotainment" is no longer limited to discussing sensitive issues, passing judgment on guests' answers, or being aggressive towards them as found in the previous studies, but also extends to engaging in practices that go beyond the boundaries of journalistic ethics. This indicates that the pressures of media competition have succeeded in pushing some Arab channels and program over the line, pointing to the urgent need for legislation to control the more unacceptable excesses of contemporary Arab broadcast interviews and talk shows.

Notes

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