

PUTTING THE SERIAL IN CONTEXT: COMPARING THE STORYTELLING PROCESSES OF CONTEMPORARY PRIMETIME KUWAITI TELEVISION DRAMAS WITH AMERICAN NETWORK DRAMAS

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ABSTRACT

Strictly designed with distinct narrative characteristics to accommodate the thirty day schedule of the holy month of Ramadan, Kuwaiti television dramas broadcast in a proliferated television landscape confined by the Arabic language, and which consists of television institutions operating from various Arab countries that compete for the vast pan-Arab audience. These unique broadcasting conditions inform the program-making practices that shape the construction of narratives across the pan-Arab region. Like American network dramas,

Kuwaiti dramas depend on advertising and syndication to generate revenue but the pan-Arab region's technological adaptation transformed the production conditions and the commissioning processes of these dramas. By comparing the commissioning process of Kuwaiti television dramas with American network dramas, this article examines the development of the storytelling practices involved in shaping their narrative conventions and illuminates the manifestation of their industrial specificities in their narrative designs. The analyses of primary interviews with writers and representative dramas suggest that the unique shared broadcasting conditions of the pan-Arab region, accompanied by the particular operations of a television industry within the region, contribute to the commissioning process and designs of television dramas, and the challenges of this competitive language-confined environment underpins the prominent and intense implementation of serialized elements in Kuwaiti television dramas.

1. INTRODUCTION

Despite having a similar revenue model to American broadcast networks, the drastic and distinct development of satellite technologies in the Middle East formed a competitive television environment that requires a set of narrative conventions to function within the boundaries of the holy month of Ramadan. These developments prioritize the need to produce thirty episodes of serialized scripted dramas and achieve complete narrative closure by the end of the month. The formation of this type of programming developed in response to the ritual habits of Muslim societies and the technological developments of media systems in the Middle East. During Ramadan, Muslims fast from sunrise to sunset and alter their daily activities accordingly. Therefore, television becomes a significant leisure activity and networks preserve and prepare exceptional and quality programs for Ramadan. With the capacity of modern satellite technologies facilitating the rise of media cities across the region, giving access to Arab audiences and allowing networks from varying states to compete with each other, a competitive language-confined television environment formed with high demand for drama production. These social and technological particularities distinguish the production of Arab narrative forms from other television dramas worldwide.

However, each country's television institution in the Middle East develops its own form of programming in an attempt to compete for the diverse pan-Arab audience. Naomi Sakr asserts that, "it is plausible to take a broad view of Arab television as an interconnected set of cultural industries, where production and exchange takes place across a market circumscribed not by tariffs or jurisdiction but by language" (2007: 2), thus making the region a unique television landscape that is dictated by shared broadcasting conditions. With Kuwait being one of the leading drama producers in the pan-Arab region (Sakr 2007), and American dramas being the prominent and most exported worldwide (Hoskins and Mirus 1988: 499–515; Nelson 2007), comparing the processes that shape their specific conventions reveals the practices that constitute their distinctions, illuminates the production conditions and modifications contributing to program development in both television landscapes, and highlights the institutional particularities that are impacted by certain industrial shifts and how these alterations are reflected in the narrative constructions of series dramas. By foregrounding these transformations, this paper illustrates that a television industry's technological adaptation, informing the norms and

conditions of distribution, contributes to the development of specific narrative elements and ultimately the construction of a programming format. More precisely, the aim of this study is to foreground how these various production dynamics contribute to the commissioning process and the employment of narrative elements in order to accommodate specific means of program production, circulation, and consumption.

With Ramadan being "The most important season for Arab television when the industry shows its very best productions, viewership soars, advertising rates peak and television programmes become topics of daily conversation" (Kraidy and Khalil 2009: 99), the demand for drama production increases and countries with established industries become beneficiaries. Kuwait leads other Gulf Cooperation Council countries (GCC) in drama production output and is one of the top three exporters in the pan-Arab region (Al Mukrashi 2015). Using the Arabic term "Khaleeji" to identify GCC productions, Suzy Karajian, Assistant General Manager at Sabbah Pictures, states that, "Around 90% of Khaleeji productions take place in Kuwait" (BroadcastPro 2014). Being one of the most prominent distributors in the region, Kuwaiti dramas are central to commissioning processes and essential to television networks across the pan-Arab region. This significance and the region's free-to-air revenue model draws comparisons with other similar revenue models such as American broadcast television. However, Anthony Smith (2019) cautions that there are certain national, economic, institutional, and technological specificities that distinguish the narrative designs of series programs. These specificities impact the methods utilized to construct storylines, episodes, and seasons. Although these specificities are relevant to television industries worldwide, this article asks: how and why do the implications of specificities vary from one television industry to another? To what extent have technological advancements of television industries altered the commissioning processes and the development of television dramas? Finally, how and why have narrative designs been directly influenced by the modifications of these specificities and to what extent are serialized elements incorporated to address these disruptive challenges? To understand these processes, this article will compare and examine the specificities from a Kuwaiti context to detail the extent of serialization employed in response to the contemporary proliferated television landscape. The purpose of the comparison is to detail the growth and implementation of the concentrated level of serialization in contemporary Kuwaiti television programs and to demonstrate how and why their designs differ from American network dramas.

The article draws upon primary interviews with three Kuwaiti writers and provides textual evidence from three culturally significant and representative dramas of this era, *Altendail* (2008), *Zawarat Al Khamis* (2010), and *Etr Alrouh* (2018). However, as shown elsewhere in the region (Salamandra 2011), writers' work status and reputation can be threatened and harmed when sensitive information regarding censorship and regulations is disclosed. Since this article contains such sensitive information and because the majority of Arab governments are structurally authoritarian, the identities of the interviewees are concealed. To protect writers' identities, this paper labels every writer with a number for identification purposes. In this way, the information can be used to support the analyses and draw conclusions.

2. ARAB AND AMERICAN TELEVISION DRAMAS

Despite permeating primetime hours during Ramadan, there are only few accounts devoted to national drama productions in the pan-Arab region. Christa Salamandra addresses the politics of drama production in Syria (2008: 177–89; 2011: 157–67; 2013) and Rebecca Joubin investigates the representations of cultural identities in Syrian dramas (2020). Furthermore, Lila Abu-Lughod provides two profound accounts that highlight the Egyptian government's utilization of soap operas to convey specific national ideologies (1993: 493–513; 2004). However, their accounts neglect the narrative designs that these industries produce and the practices involved in developing their formal properties. Other scholars have focused on the technological shifts and the role of satellites in the expansion of television networks and the rise of media cities across the region (Fakhreddine 2001; Khalil 2013; Sakr 2007). Although these studies provide insights into the production environment, they fail to acknowledge the impact that such technological conditions and alterations have on the narrative characteristics of television programs. What they do acknowledge however is the industrial transformations occurring and the impact they have on issues of regional program circulation. These inquiries establish a framework for understanding the historical development of the television landscape in the pan-Arab region, and differentiate the region from other distinguishable transformations occurring elsewhere.

Although satellite technologies first emerged in the pan-Arab region in 1990, more advanced satellites with

greater capacity for channel carriage, Nilesate 101 and 102, launched in 1998 and 1999 (Sakr 2002). Prior to these advancements, the television landscape in the pan-Arab region consisted of a limited amount of networks, mostly state-owned, in a region considered to be certain with less sophisticated and fractured audiences for the available networks. However, the advanced satellites facilitated the increase in the amount of regional networks and created program innovation possibilities that would potentially form a competitive environment in what was once considered an underdeveloped region (Kraidy 2002). Such advancements informed the characteristics of series dramas as networks began to compete for pan-Arab audiences and altered their commissioning processes to increase their market shares.

In response to these technological developments, Kuwaiti dramas have undergone substantial modifications at the episodic and season levels. Dramas that once consisted of eleven and thirteen episodes during the pre-satellite era (1961-1990), increased to fifteen episodes during the satellite era (1990-2000), before moving towards a thirty-episode season in the network proliferation era (2000 onward) and occupy the daily broadcast schedule of Ramadan (Hayat 2020). Changes in the amount of episodes are derived from the demands placed by regional networks, the technological advancements providing access across the region, and the level of competition generated by the rapid increase in Arab television networks. Not only have these technological disruptions informed the amount of episodes produced, but they also contributed to the changes in the attributes of the form. As a result, contemporary Kuwaiti dramas are designed to accommodate these industrial transformations and function to address these unprecedented challenges. However, technological developments have also occurred in American television but their employment of serialized storylines evolved alongside a more traditional episodic form due to the production conditions surrounding the industry.

Amanda Lotz (2014) clarifies the specificities of the developmental periods that American television underwent and highlights her eras as the network era (1952-1980s), the multi-channel transition era (1980s-mid 2000s), and the post-network era (mid 2000s onward) to illuminate the shifts in production practices and program innovations created by the changes in distribution models and commercial imperatives. These transformations cleared the path for the emergence of basic cable and premium cable network models resulting in the construction of unprecedented program forms. As a result, these industrial shifts informed the sto-

ytelling changes occurring in American broadcast dramas. The impact of these transformations is exemplified in many accounts that detail the development of the features of American broadcast dramas. Jane Feuer (1986) argues that two forms of series dramas permeated American broadcast television, the serial and the episodic, but Jeffrey Sconce (2004) explains that developments in programming due to the rise of cable networks created a mixed form of narrative that combines features from both formats. He contends that American broadcast dramas provide serialized plots with each episode containing an episode-specific dilemma that is introduced and resolved during an episode. However, Jason Mittell (2006: 29–40) clarifies that there is an enhanced emphasis on serialization rather than a mixture of the serial and the episodic in these complex narratives. Thus, while serialization dominates primetime dramas in American broadcast television, the episodic dilemma remains crucial to the commissioning process of these shows. Also, because of this shifting emphasis on serialization, Smith (2019) argues that these shows modify the serialization of soap operas to fit their primetime hours and accommodate the scheduling and viewer targeting strategies of American broadcast networks. These changes in the commissioning process of serialization transpired in an attempt to lure broad demographics, deliver them to advertisers, and compete during an uncertain industrial period where basic cable and subscription-based network models were challenging the status quo (Lotz 2014; Mittell 2010). With these accounts detailing the unique developments that impacted the constitution of contemporary American network dramas, the particularities of the television landscape in the pan-Arab region informed the creation of different types of series programs with customized narrative characteristics. The next section will examine the factors informing the development of characters in Kuwaiti dramas and compare them with American broadcast dramas to distinguish the particularities of their employment and foreground the influence that certain industrial transformations in the pan-Arab region have on the increased emphasis of serialization within the Kuwaiti storytelling industry.

3. CONTEXTUALIZING CHARACTERS

American network dramas, because of the endeavor to continue for multiple seasons, emphasize an investment in character development and establish opportunities for complex storytelling. This form of complex characterization is

applied to target the sophisticated upscale audiences that advertisers maintain as lucrative spenders and keep as many demographics invested for multiple seasons (Smith 2019). By having characters grow and evolve, the objective to produce subsequent seasons and maintain series longevity is executed (Newman 2006: 16–28). Despite these complex initiatives, there are certain character types utilized to accommodate advertising preferences. Unlike the dubious traits that are typical of characters from basic and premium cable networks (Dunleavy 2017; Mittell 2015b), broadcast networks ensure that their characters are strictly constructed to avoid extreme dubious behavior and appeal to a broader audience. According to Smith, “As many advertisers might balk at associating their brand with an ongoing character who repeatedly carries out heinous actions, networks usually typically ensure that protagonists’ flaws run only so deep” (2019: 61). Such considerations for advertising preferences highlight the impact that the complicated commercial conditions have on the development of characters and the extent of advertising influence on the employment of certain storytelling elements in American broadcast networks. It is through this adherence to the commercial conditions of broadcast networks and the targeting of wider demographics that these characters are constructed.

Similarly, Kuwaiti dramas employ complex characters, but the national specificity and the sophisticated relationship between advertisers and networks in the pan-Arab region provide a different dynamic for character construction. Kuwaiti dramas are designed as one-off seasons in a production environment that requires an episode per day to fill the thirty day schedule of Ramadan. Thus, Kuwaiti dramas are also seeking series longevity but for a single month rather than multiple seasons. To achieve these daily broadcast objectives, character growth and change becomes a significant element to keep and ensure that invested viewers are rewarded with character revelations as the season progresses.

However, networks in the Middle East operate from countries that have specific content regulations and censorship criteria. These regulations vary between countries, and networks broadcasting from a specific country must comply with the nation’s established standards to avoid lawsuits and license suspensions (Sakr 2007). Therefore, each country in the pan-Arab region restricts and establishes its own standards for portrayals, which depend on the state’s ideological objectives.

The lack of the immoral dubious protagonist in Kuwaiti dramas is derived from the regulations enforced by the cen-

sorship department at the Ministry of Information of Kuwait rather than the mere pressure of advertisers and their preferences. The censorship department must approve scripts before production can take place in Kuwait. If production takes place without the censorship department's approval, the department will prohibit the show from being broadcast. In 2018, eight shows were banned from broadcasting on any network operating from Kuwait because they failed to adhere to the censorship department's standards and proceeded without obtaining script approval (Abdul Sattar 2018). As a result, writing dubious and hideous protagonists is a risk for writers seeking to obtain script approval. One writer declares, "The censorship department rejected one of my scripts because one of my storylines had a business man cheat and steal from his partner. The script was rejected and the censorship department informed me that Kuwaitis are not cheaters or thieves" (Writer 2). In this way, issues of representation and conveyance are central to the decision-making process of narrative designers. In Kuwait, such restrictions and preferences are motivated by the state's use of media to promote and encourage certain values to construct a state-serving Kuwaiti identity (Crystal 2016). These imposed regulations prohibit the construction of hideous Kuwaiti protagonists because such portrayals can be deemed offensive to the prevailing Islamic and tribal values of Kuwaiti society. With the state's perception of dramas as ideological publicity tools, and to avoid social displeasures and endorse specific identities and values, the censorship department restricts such immoral protagonists and prefers conventional characterization. These restrictions support the censorship department's aim of preventing controversial conveyances (Al-Husaini 2016).

Because of these regulations, there are notable gender-specific representations in Kuwaiti dramas (Al-Qazwini 2015). For example, men protagonists who engage in romantic affairs in *Altendail*, *Zawarat Al Khamis*, and *Etr Alrouh* have their relationships culminate in second marriages. This is because relationships that culminate in second marriages are permitted in Islamic jurisprudence and consequently the Kuwaiti constitution. By ending in second marriages, the behaviors of these protagonists are deemed acceptable rather than controversial. Characters who fail to culminate their romantic relationships in second marriages are positioned as antagonists in the narrative. In this way, the romantic affairs are considered conventional and state-serving by the censorship department. Contrarily, women protagonists never engage in such romantic relationships because according to Islamic jurisprudence and Kuwaiti law, a woman is only allowed to

marry one man at a time. Therefore, having women protagonists engage in romantic affairs is considered a heinous act in Kuwaiti culture. Clarifying the procedures involved when planning these portrayals, an interviewee explains that "Our society treats this issue as sensitive and the censorship department's restrictions require adultery to be committed by the characters of men and not women" (Writer 1). This gender-specific framing of polygamy adheres to the state's official religion and promotes Islamic constructs to serve the country's national identity as an Islamic country. Because of these state-controlled regulations, advertisers focus on stardom and are more concerned with the quality of stars attached to these dramas instead of the type and moral of the program's protagonist, since interferences are more complicated and unachievable in this broadcasting environment. Another writer explains,

One of the more significant factors for script evaluation by networks is the amount of stars attached to a script. Networks and production houses desire scripts that have stars attached to them. Actually, this is a criterion for approval. This is the way for them to attract sponsors. Stars bring more sponsors and networks want to attract as many sponsors as possible (Writer 3).

Because stardom is crucial to the commissioning process of these dramas and because advertisers acknowledge the regulations that networks and producers adhere to when designing characters, advertisers are certain that characters are morally conventional and refrain from suggesting specific character types or advise on storyline direction. However, to accommodate these star-driven conditions, the persistent occurrence of the show's stars in every episode and an extensive serialization of every storyline to achieve this persistence are mandatory for revenue generation. Therefore, writers refrain from providing episodic dilemmas or stand-alone story of the week episodes that are typical of American network dramas. Mittell elaborates, "Complex dramas like *The X-Files*, *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*, *Angel*, and *The Sopranos* often oscillate between long-term arc storytelling and stand-alone episodes" (2006: 33). These types of episodic elements devote a significant amount of episodic time to the episode's conflict, or focus on a never again referenced story. By doing so, other storylines become deemphasized and the potential to increase the amount of ongoing serialized arcs lessens considerably. This will keep the focus on specific stars without

presenting the others and while episode-specific conflicts and story of the week episodes function to add depth to protagonists in American network dramas (Lotz 2013), Kuwaiti dramas utilize character complexity through subplot variety and involvement. This form of representation supports the broadcasting strategies of networks during the competitive landscape of the network proliferation era. By ensuring that the show's stars are available in every episode and that their plots are being presented, storylines are then constantly revisited in an attempt to reach all invested viewers and various demographics.

This star occurrence necessity motivates the utilization of multiple serialized storylines for each star of the show. As a result, star characters must address and resolve more than one conflict and are therefore influential to the development and resolution of multiple storylines. By situating these star characters as influential figures to the development of the majority of storylines, a star character's involvement in a storyline reveals character perspective and informs the plot's thematic meaning. Thus, a star character's longevity becomes essential to the show's aim of achieving complete narrative closure by the end of the month and the comprehension of the narrative's intended meaning. For instance, Moza's character in *Zawarat Al Khamis* must intervene in her sons' marriages to keep them from fracturing. At the same time, she must save her daughter from her chaotic marriage and help her divorce her husband. In this way, viewers learn Moza's views about the patriarchal system and its convenience through her involvement in other subplots. They also witness the character evolve and form a specific perspective through this involvement. For Moza, this system is only applicable when it is convenient to the family. While this is ongoing, Moza must also address her own dysfunctional marriage and her husband's ongoing affair with her sister, which is the main storyline of the show. In this way, marginal and less significant storylines become central to the character's growth, and the character's involvement in these storylines enhances their value and reveals the narrative's thematic meaning. By necessitating the character's involvement, the character's continuous existence becomes mandatory for conflict resolution and single-season character longevity and complexity is therefore achieved. This form of character complexity is accommodating for networks, advertisers, and demographic diversity.

Although this strategy is available and utilized in American network dramas, it is implemented at a higher level and is central to the serial design of Kuwaiti dramas. The distinction here is that American dramas do suspend some

protagonists as seasons progress, depending on actor contracts, availability, and continuity (Mittell 2015a). In many instances the suspension occurs in later seasons rather than the first season of the show. However, actor contracts in Kuwaiti dramas, because of their single season Ramadan-centered construction, pertain to a single season only. Once closure is achieved, the show is over without any potential or plan for subsequent seasons. In this way, character longevity for a single season is granted since producing multiple seasons is not part of the show's planning and an actor's involvement for future seasons is therefore unnecessary. This capitalization on star characters in the narrative design is crucial to the show's market value. For instance, suspending star characters before season's end could decrease the show's market value and risk its potential to lure brands as the season progresses. To capitalize on the show's signed stars; persistently revisiting their storylines supports the commercial conditions of the single-season commitment.

This single season character longevity approach also serves economic and viewer targeting purposes. By expanding the narrative canvas with additional storylines and raising the importance level of the less significant storylines, writers are able to attach a limited amount of star actors instead of increasing the amount of stars and consequently the show's budget. Sakr explains that "In this environment, spending \$2 million on a single musalsal was no longer unusual, as producers competed with each other to sign up the most popular actors and provide them with lavish or unusual sets" (2007: 126). However, signing costly star actors increases the budget tremendously but since it is a priority in this environment, writers incorporate a limited amount of star characters and increase the amount of serialized storylines that require their involvement to keep the show affordable and lucrative within a specific budget. This is cost-efficient for Kuwaiti dramas because Kuwaiti star actors are amongst the highest paid in the region, and the expensive cost of signing star actors can occupy up to half of the production budget (Al-Shammari 2016). With a limited amount of stars that constantly appear in every episode and address more than one conflict, writers are able to limit production costs, address broader social issues and provide diverse characters to reach various audience segments, and keep the series commercially attractive for advertisers. This will broaden the show's demographic appeal and as a result, make it serviceable for diverse brands.

This section highlighted the rationale prompting the writing of complex characters in Kuwaiti dramas and compared these processes to American broadcast dramas. American

broadcast dramas aim to continue for multiple seasons and generate revenue on a long-term basis, compete with sophisticated revenue models, and accommodate diverse audience segments, demographics, and brands. Therefore, the utilization of complex characters functions to support these initiatives. However, Kuwaiti dramas construct complex characters but must adhere to the regulations imposed by The Ministry of Information, have star actors central and continuous in their narrative designs to satisfy advertisers, and at the same time diversify storylines to reach wider segments and demographics. These commissioning differences not only inform characterization but also the episode design of these serialized plots, which the next section will detail.

4. EPISODE AND STORYLINE DESIGNS

Because of the star-centered necessities, episodes of Kuwaiti dramas contain more storylines than episodes of American network dramas and their construction is consequently impacted by this distinction. Unlike the rapid intercut between four to five storylines, typical of American network dramas, episodes of Kuwaiti dramas consist of six to eight storylines without an episode-specific conflict. American network dramas utilize a flexi-narrative approach where four to five plots are presented with one of the plots being episodic in nature to execute their audience targeting objectives (Nelson 1997). Smith explains that “The perception within the network environment that a brisk presentation of storyworld is a reliable method with which to hold viewers’ attention (and thus deliver them to advertisers) underpins this plotting technique” (2019: 62). With scenes being short in length, American dramas are able to ensure that the intercut serves their targeting approach by addressing the various invested viewers and provide enough narrative time to the episode-specific dilemma to attract the casual viewer. According to Michael Newman, “Episodic closure is thus a product of an industrial context in which serials are under increasing pressure to offer episodic pleasure to casual viewers at the same time additional, serialized pleasures to their faithful regulars” (2006: 20).

While this form of episodic design is motivated by these specific viewer targeting initiatives, the need for star reoccurrence and the focus on invested viewers only in Kuwaiti dramas motivate a different type of episode design. Kuwaiti dramas offer a structure that emphasizes the presentation of most of the available storylines rather than a brisk presentation of each and as a result, scenes can last longer than those

presented in American dramas. The strategy is to provide a vast number of storylines within the episode and achieve their star-driven season-long serialized objectives. This increase in storyline per episode approach will accommodate the diverse pan-Arab audience by constantly offering various demographics and segments their preferred storyline. For instance, presenting and leaving star characters in uncertain situations and providing a hiatus for their conflicts in every episode increases the level of seriality provided and implies that these characters will continue to exist and evolve for invested viewers. This forms a higher amount of cliff-hangers than the four to six provided in American network dramas. In this way, the presented storyline is always left in a hiatus before shifting to another storyline. Even when a storyline is left in a hiatus midway through the episode, its revisiting can sometimes occur in the subsequent episode and as a result, the hiatus will serve to tempt engaged audiences for the following episode. Because of this emphasis on serialization, constrained by the boundaries of Ramadan, episodic closure is non-existent in Kuwaiti dramas and a continuous form of episode design is the preferred approach.

Because there is an emphasis on storyline presentation and the need to have all storylines ongoing until they reach the last two episodes of the season and resolve, writers balance their organization of storylines to avoid narrative repetition and exhaustion. In *Altendail*, *Zawarat Al Khamis*, and *Etr Alrouh*, the majority of episodes contain six to seven storylines with some containing all eight storylines. Only two to four out of thirty episodes have five storylines. Although a storyline’s episodic time and progression varies, storylines that contain less episodic time than the ones emphasized will serve to remind viewers of their existence for future progression. This allows the spread of significant plot points for all storylines across the season rather than develop gradually and concurrently.

Through this balancing design, the employed strategy is therefore invitational rather than attention-driven. However, developing storylines in this serialized form with the aim of keeping star actors involved and relevant in almost every episode requires manipulating storyline presentation. For instance, less significant storylines can be interwoven and occupy the majority of episodic time early in the season before shifting the focus to more significant main plots later in the season, which is the case in *Zawarat Al Khamis*. Also, as exemplified in *Etr Alrouh*, the balance could develop one of the major plots early in the season along with other subplots before slowing this group’s progression and shifting the

focus to another group of plots later on. Since star actors will almost always be involved in less significant subplots, this process keeps every episode intriguing throughout the season and disperses plot events across the narrative. Such a strategy provokes audience excitement for the long-term season objectives (Writer 1).

This presentational approach informs the length and design of scenes in Kuwaiti dramas. Since the progression and presentation of storylines in Kuwaiti dramas vary between episodes, scenes are designed to build narrative bytes and offer enough narrative detail for a presented storyline during an episode to achieve this balance and emphasize specific storylines. Both Kuwaiti dramas and American broadcast dramas offer scenes that are two minutes in length but instead of a rapid intercut between storylines, Kuwaiti dramas oscillate between two minute scene lengths and multiple two minute scenes to build sequences focusing on a single storyline before shifting to another storyline. Therefore, some storylines are presented for more than two minutes and can last for five minutes before shifting to another storyline. If divided into narrative bytes, which Nelson (1997) explains as the amount of screen time given to a storyline before shifting to another storyline and are usually two minutes in length in American network dramas, Kuwaiti episodes utilize bytes that are two to five minutes in length. By providing lengthier narrative bytes, certain storylines become centralized during an episode, making it possible to balance the narrative progression of six to eight storylines across the season. As one writer notes, "Usually thirty pages equate to a single episode and that is what matters most. The duration of the scene is not something I emphasize" (Writer 3). Thus, the organization of plot events across the season dictates the construction of scenes in Kuwaiti episodes.

This lengthier byte design resembles the subscription-based dramas that are commissioned by American premium cable networks (Smith 2011: 36–51). The difference is that subscription-based dramas depend on subscription fees rather than advertising revenue which provides their narrative designers the ability to increase scene length in order to convey character reactions and intensify moments. Additionally, subscription-based dramas have longer scene lengths than American broadcast dramas (approximately three minutes) but they also intercut between storylines and rarely build sequences that can last for more than three minutes. Because Kuwaiti writers are unaware of the placement of commercial slots during pre-production and networks determine these decisions after the show has been completely written and

produced, they have more flexibility in their scene and episode construction. The lack of ad-break awareness provides Kuwaiti writers the same design opportunities available for premium cable models but they utilize their scenes differently. Kuwaiti writers are not only able to offer character reactions for plot events, but intensify revelations through moments of silence and emphasize a character's arc through event details, develop a character's decision-making process, and detail the aftermath of events through these multiple scene sequences. In the process, this permits writers to centralize specific storylines, keep other less-emphasized storylines relevant, and support the continuity of all storylines for the duration of the season. This form of byte design is explained by one of the writers:

Sometimes my episodes offer ten scenes that make up the entire episode and other times I find out that a single scene equals six other scenes in other episodes. So it really depends on what I am trying to convey during the episode (Writer 1).

For networks, this episodic design supports their revenue generation efforts by facilitating the incorporation of additional commercial slots during episodes and provides opportunities for advertisers to join the program at any point during the season, which explains the lack of predetermined commercial break placement during pre-production. One writer notes, "Networks attract advertisers after the show has been written and they fail to guess or predetermine the amount of advertising breaks before airing the show because the amount of breaks can continue to increase during the season" (Writer 1). Another writer adds that "They input breaks at any point within the episode and sometimes break the logic of the scene. As a writer, I cannot predict where a commercial break occurs to at least be able to construct my scenes and episodes accordingly" (Writer 3). Without predetermining commercial slots, networks are able to add additional ad-breaks, invite more advertisers as the season progresses, and continue to reconsider the cost of every slot depending on the ratings for each episode. Networks are then able to capitalize on their commercial slots and provide as many slots as possible during an episode to increase their revenue and cover the costs spent on signing star actors.

With conflicts being serialized to capitalize on the attached stars, it makes the show more appealing for advertisers and allows the network to promote the season as a large cohesive narrative unit and assure continuity and consis-

tency. Therefore, writers abstain from providing stand-alone episodes because they would depart the storyworld and suspend some of the star characters and their storylines. While this is beneficial for the commissioning process of American broadcast dramas because of the strategy's usefulness in syndication and reruns (Newman 2006: 16–28), this form of storytelling is risky in a star-driven Kuwaiti format because a ratings spike for one of these stand-alone episodes fails to offer any projection of success for subsequent episodes. This makes it more difficult for networks to convince more brands to join for subsequent episodes because it fractures the season's progressive unity. With syndication usually preferred during Ramadan rather than a later time due to the month's exceptional escalated viewership, keeping a serialized narrative chronology ongoing without departing the storyworld in certain episodes serves the broadcasting conditions of Ramadan and accommodates different network schedules and audience segments.

The preference for syndication during Ramadan comes from the possibility of reaching vast pan-Arab audiences regardless of airtime hours. This is not to neglect that audience reach and appeal varies between timeslots, but even non-primetime hours during Ramadan have escalated viewership numbers. A recent YouGov survey commissioned by Netflix reveals that viewership during Ramadan increases by 78%, making the holy month a priority for product marketing (Hawkes 2018). Since networks with syndication rights are only obligated to air the show after the first-run, they become significant windows for the budget planning process of various brands and markets. For instance, a show's first-run can air on one network early in the evening and the syndicated airtime would broadcast the same night a couple of hours apart on a different network. In this way, diverse audience segments can be reached. For advertisers willing to target a specific audience segment with their products, this syndication process offers them the opportunity to address their desired market. In this way, networks with second and third syndication rights become beneficiaries because they accommodate various viewing schedules, demographics and segments, and brands. In fact, syndicating and rerunning the same show during Ramadan is more profitable for networks than reruns outside of the holy month because of ad-break rates. During Ramadan, a thirty second primetime ad-break costs approximately 12,750 USD, while the non-Ramadan thirty second break costs 8,000 USD (Statista 2016). This increase in ad cost is also relevant for late night hours. Despite the spike in ad-rates, this proliferated season presents an op-

portunity to reach broader audiences and "If advertisers can hitch themselves to the right program, the benefits can extend well beyond the season" (Carrington 2013). Therefore, syndication during Ramadan is significantly profitable for networks and advertisers regardless of the type of syndication rights acquired.

This is different from American broadcast dramas where syndication can usually happen out of order for years to come. Therefore, it is profitable for their commissioning process to provide episodic dilemmas and stand-alone episodes that would enhance their comprehensibility regardless of the broadcasting aims and schedules of various networks. Contrarily, the ritual and cultural norms of audiences during Ramadan in a proliferated pan-Arab marketplace require an intensified form of serial storytelling with a high level of character investment to target the invested viewer rather than the casual viewer. Justifying this emphasis on episodic serialization, one writer maintains that "My scenes are serialized with the purpose of enticing viewers for subsequent scenes and episodes" (Writer 2). Utilizing the episode's narrative time to present the majority of storylines supports the development of characters and the serialized conflicts to suit the production conditions and viewing habits of Ramadan audiences without jeopardizing any of the show's stars.

This episodic design distinguishes Kuwaiti television dramas from American network dramas and highlights the extent of serialization employed for a converging, institutionally diverse, and language stipulated media environment. Despite the similarity in terms of revenue generation streams, the various economic, national, audience, and technological specificities dictate the construction of Kuwaiti dramas' characters, episodes, and seasons. By considering these conditions, Kuwaiti writers are able to construct a narrative form that can accommodate the boundaries of the holy month of Ramadan in a competitive landscape and develop a cultural product that is distinct through specific storytelling elements and procedures. These designs are motivated by the level of competition generated by the technological advancements of satellites in the pan-Arab region.

5. CONCLUSION

This article set out to highlight how differences in technological and industrial developments pertaining to specific media environments inform the employment of serialized elements in drama productions. By comparing primetime Kuwaiti dra-

mas with American broadcast dramas, the study illustrates the rationale prompting certain narrative designs and the role of the particularities surrounding specific broadcasting operations in the commissioning process. These operations impact the practices developed by narrative designers and distinguish one television industry from another. Although the revenue model of both Kuwaiti and American network dramas is supported by advertisers and syndication to generate profits, the correlation between the national, economic, technological, and audience specificities pertaining to their television industries dictate the program-making practices and extent of serialization employed. Moreover, the details of the development processes of the pan-Arab specificities, influenced by the growth and carriage improvement of satellite technologies, contribute significantly and are reflected in the narrative characteristics of their productions. In the process, these sophisticated and particular conditions establish a framework for program development.

The audience specificity of the pan-Arab region during Ramadan, the technological developments permitting accessibility across the pan-Arab region, the censorship and regulations imposed by the broadcasting nation, and the revenue streams shared across the region are significant factors informing the development and constitution of Kuwaiti television dramas. Such particularities differ drastically from developments occurring in American television where the commercial imperatives and competition between broadcast, cable, and premium cable network models established a different television environment that informed other narrative innovations. As this paper has shown, the commissioning of certain television dramas depends on the development of these specificities, and the construction of specific narrative characteristics are designed in response to the television landscape's alterations and a cultural industry's technological adaptation. Because of these alterations in the pan-Arab region, a modified form of serialization became standardized in the Kuwaiti television industry and functions as an instrument to compete and captivate in the network proliferation era. For networks, keeping their viewers and advertisers until the last day of Ramadan is a priority that can be achieved by the capabilities of serialized storytelling.

The Kuwaiti case offers a critical example of a cultural industry's technological adaptation within the broader pan-Arab region and displays that despite the academic categorization of Arab dramas as one broad entity, every nation's narrative modifications varies and this is reflected in its institutions' narrative characteristics. Although there are

shared revenue and broadcasting conditions that every Arab country operates within, there are also national specificities concerning every country's television industry that contribute to the construction of their narratives. Kuwaiti writers address the conditions of the pan-Arab landscape through an enhanced level of serialization. Further inquiries can illuminate the construction of other dramas across the pan-Arab region and detail their developments in a changing, complex, and proliferated television environment.

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