Introduction: Adapting *Idols*

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Idols is one of the most popular and successful global television formats produced in the last decade. The format has been adapted in over 40 territories all over the world, as the appendix – compiled by Sukhpreet Singh and Martin Kretschmer for this book – shows. The original show, *Pop Idol*, went to air in the UK in 2001. The next year, local versions of the show were broadcast in Poland, South Africa, the USA, Germany and the Netherlands. By the end of 2004 – exactly three years after the introduction of *Pop Idol* – 30 territories were screening their own *Idols* shows, illustrating the rapid global spread of the format. In some cases *Idols* was produced for transnational geographic regions, such as *Asian Idol* – with auditions in India, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Vietnam – and the Pan-Arab *Superstar*, which featured contestants from Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Jordan, Libya, Morocco and Algeria. The most recent branch on the global *Idols* tree at the time of writing is *Idol Puerto Rico*. The owners of the *Idols* format, FremantleMedia and 19 Entertainment, have thus managed to capitalize on the work put into the design of the original UK show by turning it into a format and selling it to a range of territories.

The goal of *Idols* shows is to involve a nation (or a region consisting of several different nations) in a quest for a popular music idol who can be admired by all. *Idols* shows are commonly divided into four distinct phases (Holmes 2004). In the first phase, hundreds or even thousands of aspiring young singers turn up to mass auditions. These auditions take place at several locations within that particular nation. Apart from people with real musical talent, viewers are confronted with notoriously 'bad' singers who think they have talent but are ridiculed by three or four judges, who generally represent different areas of the music industry. The second phase focuses on a selection of contestants as they perform on stage in a theatre. At the end of this phase, the judges make their final selection of contestants. In the third phase, during which the remaining singers receive style advice, vocal tuition and performance training, viewers are for the first time given the opportunity to vote. Each of the remaining contestants performs and audiences phone in or send SMS messages to signal which contestants they want to be part of the final phase of the show. During this fourth and last phase, contestants perform live on stage in front of a large studio audience and the judges. Audiences are invited to vote and although the judges give their professional opinion, the final decision on who stays and who leaves the talent competition is now based on viewer votes. The contestant with the least amount of votes is voted off on a weekly basis, until ultimately only one idol remains.

Despite obvious similarities between *Idols* shows, local *Idols* adaptations always articulate both the global and the local, as pointed out by Tarja Rautiainen-Keskustalo (2009). One of the central arguments of this book is that *Idols* is always *adapted* to local culture and that through adaptation specific local issues at play in a particular territory can be addressed. Authors in this book draw on theories of format adaptation that stress that television formats acquire meaning through the contexts in which they are produced and consumed. They follow Rautiainen-Keskustalo's (2009, 495) appeal that '[i]n order to understand the significance of the format, we need to see how different kinds of musical, historical and social worlds overlap when the format is broadcast in the different cultures'.

History and Context of *Idols*

In most countries, *Idols* arrived on the back of other 'event' reality television formats such as *Big Brother* and *Survivor* (see Holmes and Jermyn 2004). *Idols* is thus part of a global wave of reality TV shows that has resulted in an increased presence of ordinary people on television screens (Turner 2009). What these programmes have in common is that they feature ordinary people as contestants in competitive settings and turn them into celebrities in the process. *Idols* has, by now, transformed many aspiring young artists into best-selling performers, among others the inaugural winner of *Pop Idol*, Will Young; the first *American Idol* winner, Kelly Clarkson; and Jennifer Hudson, who did not actually win the *American Idol* series in which she appeared but received an Academy Award for her role in the film *Dreamgirls*. Li Yuchun, the 2005 winner of the Chinese *Super Girl* show, quickly rose to become one of China's most famous pop stars (Yang 2009). By turning ordinary people into celebrities on global scale, the *Idols* format has challenged and renewed conceptions of stardom and fame.

Idols is definitely not the first talent show format, however. Stijn Reijnders (2006) has traced the origins of the talent quest back to festive rituals in the middle ages. He also points out that there had been at least a dozen other singing competition shows on Dutch television before the arrival of *Idols*. A direct forerunner of the *Idols* format is *Popstars*, a television talent show developed by John Dowling. *Popstars* first screened in New Zealand, after which it was sold to Australia and the UK. It was an important source of inspiration for Simon Fuller, the creator of the *Idols* format (Rautiainen-Keskustalo 2009). The popularity of *Idols* has led to a flurry of similar talent shows on television, such as *The X Factor*, *The Voice* and *Got Talent* shows (for example *America's Got Talent* and *Britain's Got Talent*). The similarities between these shows and *Idols* are a focus on ordinary people with special talent, the appearance of a small group of judges or mentors who select the contestants, the transformation of these contestants into stars and, in most cases, a deciding role for television viewers at home, who are invited to support contestants by voting for them through phoning in and sending SMS messages.

What *Idols* has added to existing talent shows is a sense of 'hype' in which a whole nation or, as explained above, a group of nations is implicated. The explicit aim of reality television shows such as *Idols* is to maximize audiences' investments, thus creating profit for producers, broadcasters and advertisers (Kjus 2009). *Idols* shows are targeted at mass audiences and have broken several ratings records in different territories. *American Idol* has perhaps been the most successful of all adaptations, reaching up to 31 million viewers in the USA alone (Wikipedia 2011). The fourth season of *American Idol* was arguably the biggest texting event in the world, with 41 million SMS messages sent by viewers to vote for their favourite contestants (Rautiainen-Keskustalo 2009). Other examples of ratings successes are the final episode of the first series of *NZ Idol*, which was watched by a third of the New Zealand population, and the Dutch adaptation of *Idols*, which was the highest rating television programme after the start of commercial television in that country (see the Chapter 1 by Sukhpreet Singh and Martin Kretschmer).

Previous Scholarship on *Idols*

Scholarly accounts on *Idols* shows started to appear several years after the first screening of *Pop Idol*. Simon Frith (2002) wondered what kind of influence the show would have on the existing relationships between music and television, posing that historically there has been an uneasy association between television conventions and notions of authenticity essential to popular music. Subsequent authors have aimed to define *Idols* in terms of its position in relation to music industries and definitions of fame and celebrity. The format is seen as a response to difficulties the music industry has been facing in connecting with its consumers (Fairchild 2004). *Idols* shows can facilitate 'affective economics', forging connections between stars and audiences across a range of media platforms while pursuing multiple branding opportunities (Fairchild 2007; Jenkins 2006). Several authors have argued that by putting the star-making process on display, *Idols* has changed conceptualizations of fame and celebrity (Holmes 2004; Fairchild 2008). In most cases, these new conceptualizations of fame raise questions about authenticity and *Idols* shows have been criticized for producing 'fake' celebrities, while contestants have had to negotiate their authenticity in relation to the visibility of the star-making process (Rautiainen-Keskustalo 2009).

Previous studies on *Idols* have also discussed how contestants represent national, cultural, ethnic and other identities. *Australian Idol* and *NZ Idol*, for example, have been praised for featuring young people from a range of cultural backgrounds (de Bruin 2008; Huijser 2007). On the other hand, *Canadian Idol* has been criticized for not incorporating candidates from non-white backgrounds (Byers 2008). *Idols* shows are often expected to represent the nation they are broadcast in. This can work differently in different locations: the Dutch *Idols* echoes Dutch community structures (Reijnders, Rooijakkers and van Zoonen 2007); *American Idol*, driven by the idea of the 'American dream', articulates

fantasies about social mobility and meritocracy (Stahl 2004); and *Indonesian Idol* showcases a new form of Indonesian celebrity identity (Coutas 2006).

The existing literature on *Idols* is dominated by scholarship on Western adaptations of the format, particularly *Pop Idol*, *American Idol* and *Australian Idol*. Moreover, rather than comparing different global versions, most scholars focus on only one *Idols* show. The show is treated as a phenomenon in itself and questions about local adaptation of the global format are not often addressed. This book aims to move beyond questions asked in existing scholarship. More than just defining what *Idols* is, different chapters identify and evaluate what it *does*, in other words, the productive dimensions of the *Idols* format. Contributors to the volume write about *Idols* adaptations in a range of locations, including the Middle East, Denmark, the USA, China, Bulgaria, the UK, Nigeria, the Netherlands, the Czech Republic, Norway, the South East Asian region and Australia. The authors address and evaluate three notions that have, as we see it, not been thoroughly examined in previous studies: questions around authenticity, identity and performance.

Authenticity, Identity and Performance

As pointed out above, the notion of authenticity has mainly been studied in relation to the construction of celebrities through *Idols*. The logic of the format presents a paradox: while its aim is to create authentic stars and involve the audience in the star-making process, *Idols* has received criticism for producing inauthentic celebrities precisely because the process of fabricating stars is rendered visible. *Idols* shows therefore have to use several strategies of promotion and narration to convey to viewers that the contestants do have an innate talent and that *Idols* is only helping them on an inevitable journey to becoming famous (Fairchild 2008). Authors in this book address the notion of authenticity on multiple levels, however. Some focus on the authenticity of contestants' performances, others analyse contestants' construction of an 'authentic self' along the lines of identities such as gender, sexuality and ethnicity, several chapters discuss the presumed authenticity or inauthenticity of particular music genres and one chapter looks at how audiences discuss authenticity in an *Idols* show.

The notion of identity is also analysed on multiple levels in this book. Authors write about the identities of contestants, the identity of music, they write about national identities, regional identities, cultural identities, diasporic identities, ethnicity, gender and sexuality. A common thread is that in the process of adapting the global *Idols* format a variety of local identities can come to the fore. Identity is seen as a process and a constant negotiation of meanings from different sources. What comes across strongly through the different case studies presented in this book is that *Idols* adaptations are always articulating, in some form or another, local politics of identity that are worked through in a particular nation or region. The third central concept addressed in this book in relation to *Idols* is performance. This notion is analysed on three interrelated levels. Firstly,

several authors write about the performances of *Idols* contestants. This can refer to the quality of their vocal performance, their live performance on stage or their performance in the media. Secondly, performance is analysed at the level of identity or the self. The assumption is here that performance results in a sense of identity, for example in relation to gender or ethnicity, or authenticity. Thirdly, fans' performances as a response to *Idols* shows are discussed in some chapters, posing that these performances are bound by particular notions of authenticity and identity represented in *Idols* shows. Different case studies presented in this book thus illustrate the significance of the notion of performance for understanding contemporary television culture.

Outline of this Book

This book is divided into three sections of five chapters each. Part 1, 'Adapting the Global *Idols* Format', presents several studies that analyse how *Idols* has been appropriated in different locations. Based on interviews with FremantleMedia staff members and visits to international television trade fairs, Sukhpreet Singh and Martin Kretschmer discuss the strategies that are used to protect and exploit the *Idols* format in a context in which there is limited legal protection for global television formats. Pia Majbritt Jensen compares two adaptations, the Danish *Idols* and *Australian Idol*, and poses – somewhat against the grain of the overall argument of this book – that variations between the two can be explained by media systemic conditions rather than differences in national or local culture. Joost de Bruin, conversely, argues that *Idols* websites differ in how they articulate national, regional and ethnic identities, and that producers in different countries have tapped into specific local sensibilities to forge emotional connections with their audiences. Jinna Tay analyses how six Asian countries used the *Idols* format – much like the *Eurovision Song Contest* – to create a regional sense of identity for Asia, even if this quest was not entirely successful. In the final chapter in this section, Tess Conner discusses ways in which diasporic identities are constructed in and around the show *Nigerian Idol*.

Part 2, 'Politics of Identity in *Idols* Shows', consists of chapters that analyse how different *Idols* adaptations have intervened in local identity debates. Václav Štětka discusses how the fact that a Roma contestant won *Czech Search for a Superstar* led to questions being raised about ethnic relations between the majority society and the Roma minority in the Czech Republic. The following chapter also focuses on one contestant, in this case the winner of the Bulgarian *Music Idol*, and her pop-folk styled performance of the American pop ballad 'I Will Always Love You'. Plamena Kourtova analyses how this performance playfully draws on notions of difference and otherness through practices of mimesis. In light of the remarkable ethnic diversity of *Australian Idol* contestants and winners, Henk Huijser addresses the question whether race and ethnicity still matter to the target audience of Australian Generation Y viewers. Mary Ghattas's chapter

focuses on *Superstar*, the Pan-Arab adaptation of *Idols*, and how, due to a series of tragic political events in Lebanon, it was forced to constantly reconcile Pan-Arab identities with Lebanese cultural politics. Finally, Jeroen de Kloet and Stefan Landsberger analyse how the Chinese *Super Girl* show illustrates different trends of globalization that China is currently facing. One of their threads of argument centres on Li Yuchun, the 2005 winner, who challenged dominant ideas about gender and sexuality through her appearance on the show.

In Part 3, 'Producing and Consuming *Idols*', the focus lies on the production and consumption of *Idols* shows, more specifically the performances by the contestants and the ways in which these performances are interpreted or taken up by audiences. Koos Zwaan and Tom ter Bogt report on a study in which audition and live show contestants of the Dutch *Idols* were compared. They found that contestants who come prepared – who have had musical lessons, who are experienced performers and who are confident about their appearance – stand a better chance of being successful in *Idols*. Nicholas Carah also writes about *Idols* contestants, focusing on the role that rock ideology plays in relation to three related media rituals: live performance, backstage representation and expert judgment. Ruth Deller analyses performances of gender and sexuality in *American Idol*, *Pop Idol* and *The X Factor*. She argues that these shows generally operate within heteronormative parameters and reinforce gender stereotyping. Vebjørg Tingstad's chapter shifts the focus to audiences. Based on a study with children and young people, Tingstad shows how audiences respond to the Norwegian *Idol*'s calls to its viewers to feel involved and vote for the contestants. In the last chapter of this section, Stijn Reijnders, Gerard Rooijakkers and Liesbet van Zoonen examine what *Idols* parties – celebrations organized by fans in response to the show – can tell us about the appropriation of television culture within everyday life.

Through these three sections the book as a whole aims to show how *Idols* has been adapted to different cultural contexts in different locations. The fifteen chapters illustrate the flexibility of the *Idols* format: even though the same format has been used in countries all over the globe, local adaptation – measured in this book along the lines of authenticity, identity and performance – has resulted in an enormous variety of different *Idols* shows.

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