

RISING STAR: A GAME-CHANGING FORMAT IN A DYING GENRE

THE HIGHS AND LOWS OF A FORMAT'S BIRTH

Merav Schiffmann
c/o Hillel Sommer
P.O. Box 167
Herzlia 46150
Israel

meravshifman@gmail.com

Abstract: In the TV industry everyone is constantly searching for 'the next big hit.' For a brief moment in time, *Rising Star* perfectly fit this description. Within days of the Israeli launch of the first season, the format had already sold internationally to major territories. *Rising Star* boasted a first of its kind audience participation and a real-time live experience. This caught the attention of producers, executives and creators everywhere. This was a game-changing concept, set to shake the genre of reality singing competition shows to the core.

The case study discussed in this paper examines the creation stages of a transmedia television format, the strains effecting its development, its rapid global roll-out and the international adaptations, primarily the failure on the US market and its negative ripple effect.

Keywords: *Rising Star*, reality singing competitions, international roll-out, transmedia

1 Introduction

The singing competition genre has enjoyed global domination for over a decade. The programme that had pioneered it all was Fremantle Media's *Pop Idol* (2001–2003), that would later evolve into the *Idol* juggernaut franchise with Fox's *American Idol* (2002–2016) being the most prominent of all versions. Breathing down the *Idols'* neck is Syco's franchise, *The X Factor* (2004–), led by its flagship, the UK's ITV's version.¹ The latest phenomenon to have joined the frenzy was Talpa's hugely successful *The Voice of Holland* (2010–), which would soon become internationally-known as *The Voice*. By the time this paper is published, *American Idol* will have wrapped its 15th and final season,² thus marking the end of an era.³

1 The format also made a much-hyped, yet ultimately short-lived attempt at crossing the pond over to the US (2011–2013).

2 Sam Thielman, 'Fox cancels American Idol amid steady ratings decline' *The Guardian*, 11 May 2015.

3 Allee Manning and Kaitlyn Kelly, 'The Slow, Painful Death Of American Idol' *Vocative*, 6 April 2016.

In Israel, over the past decade, the undisputed ruler of the singing competition genre has been *A Star is Born* (2003–2012; Hereafter *ASIB*). However, in recent years, this brand too, has not been able to escape the ripple effect of the genre's worldwide decline.^{4,5,6,7}

With that in mind, the case of *Rising Star* (2013–; Hereafter *RS*), a spin-off of sorts, conceived moments before the axe fell on *ASIB*, becomes a retelling of the Phoenix's rise from the ashes.

2 *A Star is Born: Last Rites*

In order to discuss *RS*'s conception, it is essential that we first revisit *ASIB* whose later seasons followed an *Idol*-esque format. Kicking off with nationwide auditions before moving on to 'boot camp,' and finally, culminating with the live shows where weekly eliminations take place until the team has been streamlined to the final three.

In 2012, *ASIB*, which airs on Israel's Channel Two, on network broadcaster Keshet,⁸ began its 10th season, a remarkable feat unprecedented on Israeli television. In January of that year *The Voice*, a second rivalling singing competition, debuted. For the first time *ASIB* faced competition, as Israeli viewers got to experience a different take on the singing competition genre. Amidst the landscape of staling, veteran programming, *The Voice–Israel* quickly became the new kid on the playground whom everyone wanted to play with. Its fresh format empowered contestants by letting *them* choose their mentor. They were also encouraged to sing in English (whereas *ASIB* has always maintained a staunch 'Hebrew-only' policy.⁹)

During its first decade, *ASIB* was considered Keshet's 'Golden Goose'.¹⁰ It became the country's hottest watercooler topic, capturing the zeitgeist, championing patriotic values of Nationalist-Zionist nostalgia, and successfully marrying local entertainment needs and global content trends (discovering the next mega star).¹¹ Over time however, ratings began to plummet. Young viewers were losing interest, and the buzz surrounding the programme was fading fast. Already during its ninth season, the media had begun eulogising the franchise with select epithets ranging from 'the end' and 'wading', to 'system breakdown,' 'loathing' and 'death,' featuring prominently in *ASIB*'s press coverage.¹²

By the time *ASIB*'s 10th cycle debuted in May 2012, audiences' waning interest was evident, and in its aftermath the season as a whole was dubbed a 'sour grape.'¹³ Viewers had moved on from themes of nostalgia and Israelism, whilst the media pleaded with production to "Spare us the Israeli Classics."¹⁴ Moreover, with the advent of new technologies, gone were also the public's mass text-voting days. Were years of on-screen harmony doomed to end on a flat, pitchy note?

4 Josef Adalian, '[America Is Getting Really Tired of Singing Competitions. What Should Networks Do Now?](#)' *Vulture*, 26 June 2014.

5 Lisa de Moraes, '[Singing show fatigue? 'American Idol' premiere ratings decline from last season](#)', *The Washington Post*, 19 January 2012.

6 Gary Levin, '[Reality check: Ratings drop for competition shows](#)', *USA Today*, 26 March 2014.

7 Mark Sweney and Tara Conlan, '[ITV lacks X factor: channel suffers lowest-ever audience share](#)', *The Guardian*, 2 March 2016.

8 Keshet is one of the two franchisees operating Channel 2, the leading commercial channel in Israel. Each franchisee operates the channel on different days of the week. See Appendix 1.

9 Gili Izikovitch, '[Born Again](#)' (in Hebrew), *Haaretz*, 22 May 2012.

10 Shay Golden, '[The Partition](#)' (in Hebrew), *NRG*, 22 July 2005.

11 Sharon Shahaf, '[Homegrown reality: locally formatted Israeli programming and the global spread of format TV](#)', *Creative Industries Journal*, 2014.

12 Tal Levin, '[Out of Tune again](#)' (in Hebrew), *Achbar Ha'Ir*, 11 July 2012.

13 Li-Or Averbach, '[It appears: A Star is Born will not be back this summer](#),' (in Hebrew) *Globes*, 24 February 2013.

14 Shirrit Troyner, '[A Star is Falling: What does the show needs to rise again?](#)', (in Hebrew), *NRG*, 5 September 2012.

3 The Powers-That-Be Behind *A Star is Born*

To understand the circumstances, which led to the inception of *RS*, one further needs to acquaint oneself with the key players at the helm of Israeli broadcasting and television production. Tedy Productions, the studio behind *ASIB*, has long since maintained a close-knit relationship with Keshet, the programme's broadcasting corporation, underscored by years of collaboration, trust, and solidarity.

For the better half of a decade, *ASIB* was Tedy Productions' crown jewel, not to mention a ratings and market goldmine for Keshet.¹⁵ However, when the tidal wave of adaptations of international monster hits (chiefly *Survivor*, 2007; *Big Brother*, 2008; and *MasterChef*, 2010) washed over Israeli reality television's landscape with great fanfare,¹⁶ it was not long before *ASIB* quickly found itself filed under 'forgotten.'

With the genre landscape radically changed, Tedy Productions, along with their partner and commissioning body, Keshet, faced their biggest challenge yet – how to revitalise and reinvigorate their top cash cow's format? It would be months before the retooled *ASIB* format would go on to become *RS*.

4 *A Star Is Born: Identifying the Cracks*

ASIB's 10th season proved that the programme had in fact lost its lustre, with the biggest question now being whether there was room for a retooled format amidst growing competition and a globally-declining genre. To answer this question, one must first review where and why the tide had turned for *ASIB*. The following observations were made from regular analyses conducted by the broadcasting network's research department:

- (1) **Genre Fatigue.** It had been over a decade since the Reality singing competition became a global phenomenon. By 2012 audiences were well-versed in the genre's formulas and viewer-manipulation tactics.¹⁷ Whether it was the editing of an audition segment (dramatic vs. comedic soundtrack) or a contestant's backstory (showing tear-jerking footage from home), viewers could now quickly *and* successfully predict whether this contestant was sticking around for the long haul. "Shocking twists" became about as shocking as breakfast cereal. Judges' critiques felt scripted and repetitive. As for the viewers? They were quite simply fed up.
- (2) **Seasonal structure.** The structure of a Reality singing competition cycle is inherently flawed. Viewership habitually declines when the nationwide auditions move on to boot camp/judges' houses/Hollywood week (as per programme), and it is only when the live telecasts kick off, and with them, viewer eliminations, that numbers begin to tick back up. As it stands, the main function of the competition's second stage is to separate the wheat from the chaff ahead of the live shows. (see [Figure 1](#)).
- (3) **Predictability.** Seasoned viewers had also grown weary of the templated drama which traditionally peaks only at the very end of the live results show. On the Israeli *ASIB*, the once tension-filled moment when the envelope containing the evening's results was handed over to the host, had become a sequence so predictable, viewers could lip-sync the host's every hyperbolised word.
- (4) **Voting method.** *ASIB* deployed text voting and online voting through its website. Text voting had been on a steady decline across all reality programmes. The website seemed outdated as new viewer-engagement platforms were appearing.

15 Gili Izikovitch, 'Born Again', (in Hebrew) *Haaretz*, 22 May 2012.

16 Source: [Official paper of the 2nd Broadcasting Authority](#) (in Hebrew). The paper concludes 2011 viewing results. It rates the top most watched shows. *ASIB* is rated as 6th, while *Big Brother* is 1st, *MasterChef* 3rd, *The Amazing Race* 5th.

17 Itzhaki Ziv, 'A Star is Born 10: Where is the Buzz?', (in Hebrew) *Achbar Ha'Ir*, 6 June 2012.

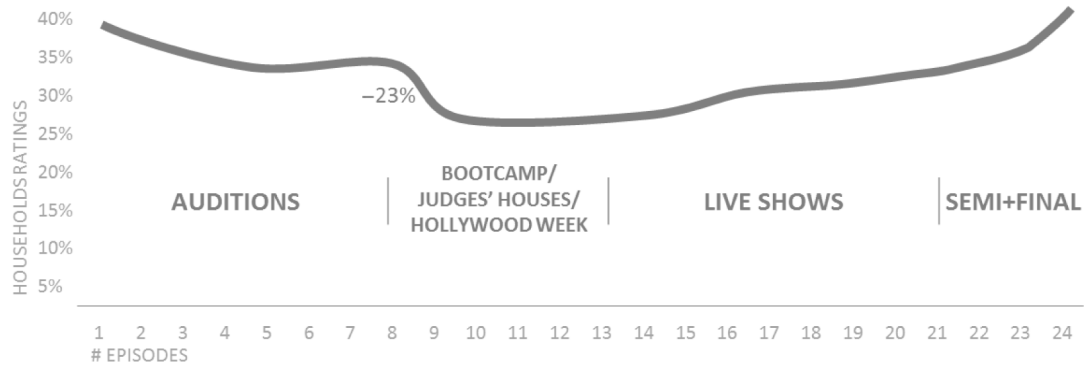


Figure 1. Reality singing competitions' overall season ratings grid (based on *ASIB* results).¹⁸

5 *A Star Is Born* Begets *Rising Star*

On the heels of *ASIB*'s largely underwhelming 10th cycle, Tedy Productions' development team was itching to come up with a new, winning formula. The shakeup began with a somewhat predictable change, when production announced a judging panel overhaul.¹⁹

However, it was through observing social media that development executives at last had their 'Eureka!' moment. The understanding that virtually anyone could appoint themselves judge and tastemaker on these platforms (predominantly Facebook at the time), helped development chiefs come to the realisation that viewers were demanding far greater control be placed in their hands. It was becoming obvious that the focus must shift from the judges and their critiques, for in this genre contestants *are* ultimately judged by viewers at home. To let viewers fully participate requires giving them the reins from day one. The *live* auditions were thus created, a game-changing shift in the genre.

The successful marriage of viewer votes and live auditions effectively shook up the reality singing competition's traditional structure to its core. For one, it meant all musical performances during all stages of the competition were now judged by viewers, rendering every performance a television 'do-or-die' moment. Furthermore, in terms of genre fatigue, this shakeup gave the format a whole new lease on life. Instead of idly waiting for some dramatic faux-climax at the tail end of a telecast, high-stakes drama was now part of every performance (with 10 acts featured per episode). Finally, predictability was all but gone. Live, viewer-voting became the programme's main driving force, impacting contestants, viewers, and production. All in real-time.

6 *Rising Star* Is Born

In order to have viewers engage live with every episode, the technology too needed a makeover. It was evident that app-voting was the only way to go. Another first for the emergent format was the way real-time app-voting results were integrated into its DNA via *RS*'s interactive onstage screen (see [Figure 2](#)).

With viewers now handed almost complete control in real-time, a new reality was formed. There was *no* show without the people at home actively participating, and therein lay the heart of the revolution. In no way was this Keshet's attempt at boasting their newest 'gimmicky' tech-toy, but rather the potential dawn of transmedia, interactive viewing.

With these innovations in place, it was time to shake up the actual studio. The new law of the land dictated that contestants perform live for the viewers and be judged by them, in real-time. With that came the need for a narrative apparatus in the form of a physical partition between contestant and audience, which could only be lifted if the former

¹⁸ Merav Schiffmann, '[Rising Star: Format Case Study](#)', *MIPFormats*, 6 April 2014.

¹⁹ Gili Izikovitch, '[A Star is Born Replaces the Judges and maybe even the host](#)', (in Hebrew), *Haaretz*, 27 May 2013.

has won the latter's hearts. A massive screen was promptly erected. It was decided that contestants would perform alone on stage with the screen separating them from the studio audience. Meanwhile, visuals of incoming votes would fill the screen as the audition played out. The screen would only rise should the contestant have won enough viewer votes; an emotionally cathartic moment in which the darkness and intimacy of their performance would be met with the stark contrast of a vast studio and audience cheers. Later, *live* onscreen images of viewers at home voting in real-time would be introduced as a further incentive to participate and vote. The programme now had its pivotal major TV moment in the bag – the 'curtain' rises - and the hopeful individual is met with wild audience applause: a life transformed.

Making a live telecast completely dependent on real-time app-voting requires changes in the production team as well. There are many new crucial tasks from editing the app content and keeping it in sync with the show, to controlling the massive volume of concurrent data flow that is the live-voting. Supervising this entire operation called for a new position and thus the role of Digital Showrunner came into being.

It began to emerge that Tedy Productions' and Keshet's uncompromising development efforts were beginning to bear fruit as a new format was born. The now, heavily-retooled, digital-centric *ASIB* was gradually taking shape. What is more, it was clear that a new name, one that would be on par with the overhauled concept was needed. The die was soon cast and the franchise was rechristened, *Rising Star*.



Figure 2. Selling the RS format: the iconic format image.

7 International Opportunity Emerges

One must now turn the eye outwards and explore the state of the local and global television landscape around the time RS was conceived.

In Israel, leading local broadcast networks were offering a range of programming, featuring a variety of localised international formats along with original programming. Prominent local adaptations included *Big Brother*, *MasterChef*, *The Voice*, *The Amazing Race*, and others.²⁰

²⁰ Lior Averbach, 'Annual ratings: 50% of programs viewed are Reality TV', (in Hebrew) *Globes*, 30 December 2012.

In 2011, US premium cable network, SHOWTIME, debuted *Homeland* - an adaptation of Israeli Keshet's *Prisoners of War*, to surprisingly high ratings,²¹ that were soon followed by several award show triumphs.²² This served as a turning point, making it clear from both a creative and business standpoint that the local industry's focus should shift to content-exporting.

At the time *Homeland* concluded its debut season in the US, Keshet Broadcasting had only two employees in charge of handling all of its international affairs and dealings. By the time *RS* premiered, an entire, fully-fledged distribution company had grown out of Keshet, complete with a newly-appointed MD and a London based Keshet International office.²³

For several years now original Israeli television formats have been no strangers to basking in the international limelight, with prime examples being HBO's *In Treatment*, and NBC's *Who's Still Standing* (which would later become a worldwide hit).²⁴ This did not go unnoticed by global television's top players. High-profile international production houses were soon going on 'shopping sprees,' buying Israeli indie companies with undisputed success (Endemol bought Kuperman Productions²⁵ while Red Arrow acquired July-August²⁶). Attention on Israel as an emerging television format market was steadily growing, culminating in MipTV 2014 which featured a focus-on-Israel theme.²⁷

8 This Is *Rising Star*:²⁸ A Reality Singing Competition on the Hunt for the Next Musical Superstar

8.1 The Format

The programme is broadcast live in its entirety with contestant auditions dubbed the 'live screen test.' On the screen facing the contestant, images of viewers at home who have been voting for them gradually appear; a mode of viewer-involvement later branded, 'TV App to you.' When the contestant hits their target (70 percent of votes during the audition stage), the screen rises, and the studio is revealed to the contestant for the first time. Each performance starts with pre-recorded audition footage before moving on to the live telecast.

8.2 Judging Panel

The four judges or 'panel of experts,' as they are referred to, also cast their votes during the live telecast. Each judge's vote is worth seven percent in the grand tallying of viewer votes. If the 70 percent threshold is met, images of the judges who had also voted for the contestant will also appear on the screen.

The second stage of the season finds contestants facing off each other. Once paired, the first one to take the stage determines the voting threshold, which their rival must now beat. The first contestant therefore sings with the screen raised, meaning the second must rise above the bar set by their predecessor in order for the screen to be raised. With these filters in place, the talent pool gradually gets streamlined until the finale.

RS took it upon itself to bring innovation into the format's every nook and cranny. From the technological aspect to the ultra-bold decision of making the auditions live, the format was aiming to become appointment television, emulating

21 Nellie Andreeva, '[Showtime's New Drama 'Homeland' Has Solid Premiere, 'Dexter' Posts Record High](#)', *Deadline Hollywood*, 3 October 2011.

22 Update, '['Homeland' Emmys Sweep: Showtime Series Wins Best Actor, Actress And Drama Series](#)', *Huffington Post*, 23 September 2012.

23 Nancy Tartaglione, '[Israel's Keshet International Sets Up Shop In London](#)', *Deadline Hollywood*, 6 December 2012.

24 Amy Chozick and Joshua Mitnick, '[Coming to America](#)', *The Wall Street Journal*, 11 March 2011.

25 Adam Benzine, '[Endemol buys Kuperman, launches Endemol Israel](#)', *Real Screen*, 29 April 2013.

26 Scott Roxborough, '[Red Arrow Buys Majority Stakes in U.K., Israeli Indie Producers](#)', *The Hollywood Reporter*, 5 October 2012.

27 Leo Barraclough, '[Cannes-set TV Mart MipTV to Focus on Israeli Biz](#)', *Variety*, 28 February 2014.

28 Israeli show website: <http://www.mako.co.il/tv-the-next-star> (Hebrew); International Format website: <http://www.keshetinternational.com/show/entertainment/rising-star/>

sporting events in which fates are determined on the spot and an entire season is underscored by non-stop triumphs and losses. As trade journalist Kate Bulkley enthused:

A quite brilliant twist for a genre that has showed signs recently that it is running on empty... At a time when keeping TV viewers tuned in is getting harder, Rising Star does offer the viewer a moment of TV fame.²⁹

9 Speed to Market

By the time *ASIB* had wrapped its 10th cycle, news of the imminent arrival of a third contender broke. *The X Factor Israel* was announced, with its host slated to be none other than international supermodel and Israeli sensation, Bar Rafaeli.³⁰

An unwritten television rule mandates that in a sea of competitors, yours must be the first show on the air. Now, with globally-acclaimed formats beating *RS* to the premiere date, pressure was beginning to mount. *RS* needed to be ready to launch as soon as possible.³¹ Also cracking the whip was Keshet International, whose needs mandated that on top of winning the Israeli demographic, the programme should also have global appeal and be an easily-adaptable format.

10 Maintaining a Digital Estate:³² The 'Live Test'

RS's format is the very epitome of transmedia, joining together content and services; linear broadcasting and online interactive experience. Combined, these elements must form a single, coherent narrative for the viewer to follow, leaving it up to them to simultaneously interact with the online app during the live telecast.

A major prerequisite of the format dictates that in order to participate, viewers must possess some degree of digital literacy. Therefore, the campaign ahead of the programme's launch focused on 'teaching'³³ the audience their digital role. The campaign ends in the 'Live Test' – a short live telecast (10–15 min), which takes place days before the series premiere. During which viewers are lifting the screen for the host (not a real performance), practicing simultaneously watching and participating.³⁴

More importantly, the 'Live Test' is the pivotal moment for the production to make sure that all systems are fully functional. *RS* background digital infrastructure leans on several technology providers serving as Transparent Intermediaries³⁵ for the viewers.

11 September 17th, 2013: Series Premiere

RS launched at the height of the Israeli holiday season. Its first contestant to take the 'live screen test' was Orit Bainsay (*RS*, 1:1.) The app-voting opens. Orit sings as her score gradually ticks up. At 18 percent, Eyal Golan is the first judge to vote (swiping 'blue'). His image promptly joins others on the big screen whilst the score shoots up to 25%. The remaining three judges soon follow suit, casting a blue vote. Bainsay is at 65 percent and the audition is nearly over. Rita, a female judge, darts to her feet, urging the audience to vote. With 20 seconds remaining, the score is at 66%.

29 Kate Bulkley, 'Singing contests turn to tech', *Broadcast*, 3 July 2012.

30 Editorial, 'The Bar Effect: Who Will Host A Star is Born?', (in Hebrew) *Kolnoan*, 28 May 2013.

31 Ran Boker, 'Rising Star vs X Factor: Who Will Launch First?', *YNET*, 10 September 2013.

32 Evans Liz, 'Building Digital Estates: Transmedia Television in Industry and Daily Life', Paper presented at the MAB/ECREA 'TV in the Age of Transnationalisation and Transmedialisation' conference, Roehampton University 22nd June 2015.

33 Israeli promo for the 'Live Test' of the show. Click [here](#) to watch it.

34 Li-Or Averbach, 'Keshet will hold a Live Test voting experiment in her format Rising Star next week', *Globes*, 8 September 2013.

35 Joshua Braun, 'Transparent Intermediaries – Building the Infrastructures of Connected Viewing', pp 124–143. In Jennifer Holt and Kevin Sanson (Eds.), *Connected Viewing – Selling, Streaming, & Sharing Media in the Digital Era*, Routledge, 2014.

Time is up. Bainsay failed to meet the 70 percent threshold. The screen never rises. The judges were all fans but viewers at home evidently were not. Production wise, the inaugural audition was expected to be the proof that the *RS* concept worked. The failed audition left the control room in shock - had the viewers not got the hang of it perhaps? The second live audition begins. Evyatar Korkus, who will later go on to win the inaugural season, takes the stage. The score quickly reaches 28% when the first judge, Rani Rahav, chimes in, adding his seven percent points. Korkus's numbers are on the rise and upon hitting the 70 percent threshold with all four judges having now voted for him, the screen rises to loud, climactic rumbling. Finally, Korkus's audition concludes with an impressive final score of 80%. With the wheels officially in motion, all that remained now was to eagerly await the overnight viewing figures.

12 *Rising Star*: An Israeli Success Story³⁶

The programme opened to huge ratings, earning a 32.6% household rating and a 44.7% share, making it Israeli television's highest-rated launch during a holiday season.³⁷ The results for the full season were even better:³⁸ *RS* reached a 33.8% household rating and a 47.4% share, ranking #1 in the weekly charts during nine out of its 14-week run. 83% of households were exposed to the programme during its first cycle with the finale earning a 40.3% household rating and a 58% share.

Meanwhile, the *RS* app boasted 1.5 million downloads. Over 10 million votes were tallied through the *Mako TV* app in the course of the season, with an unprecedented 30% conversion rate. (Israel is a tech savvy nation, ranked number three in the world in smart phone ownership.³⁹)

The first season managed to outperform a decade of *ASIB* (see [Figure 3](#)). By successfully retooling this steadily-staling format, the programme won back the coveted 12–17 demographic (see [Figure 4](#)), who were conclusively back and tuning in weekly (see [Figure 5](#)).⁴⁰

13 International Format Roll-out

Rising Star, the fastest-selling talent show format of all time, according to research group The WIT.⁴¹

With a hit in the bag and a game-changing format that had already proven successful in Israel, it was time to let Keshet International's distribution arm take the wheel and roll out *RS* to the global market.

14 September 18th, 2013: Munich, Germany

Just a day after the series premiered in Israel, a number of TV executives gathered at the first of several pre-market, closed events. These events, specially-designated for format buyers, offer a first look at all the formats that will later be unveiled at MIPCOM/MIPTV. At the *RS* presentation, both the promo and the first show results were screened. A commotion soon ensued with eager buyers simultaneously intrigued and aghast at the many digital novelties and the very concept of the live auditions. The stars had aligned. The format was ruled groundbreaking. In the days that followed, the buzz only grew.

36 See Appendix A for Israeli Television's Landscape.

37 [Keshet International official PR notice](#).

38 [Keshet International official PR notice](#).

39 Jacob Poushter, 'Smartphone Ownership and Internet Usage Continues to Climb in Emerging Economies', *Pew Research Center*, 22 February 2016.

40 Merav Schiffmann, 'Rising Star: Format Case Study', *MIPFormats*, 6 April 2014.

41 Scott Roxborough, 'MIPTV: Keshet Sells 'Rising Star' to Greece, Ukraine', *The Hollywood Reporter*, 19 March 2014.

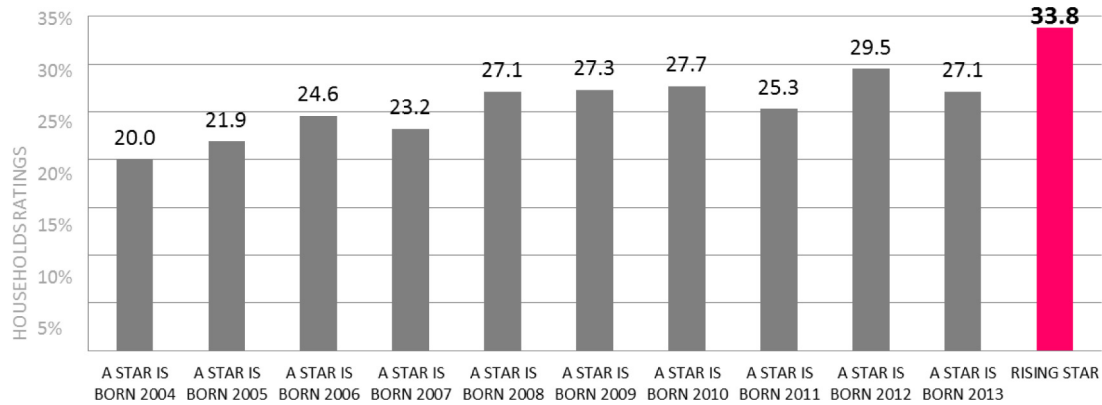


Figure 3. Average household ratings per season comparison.

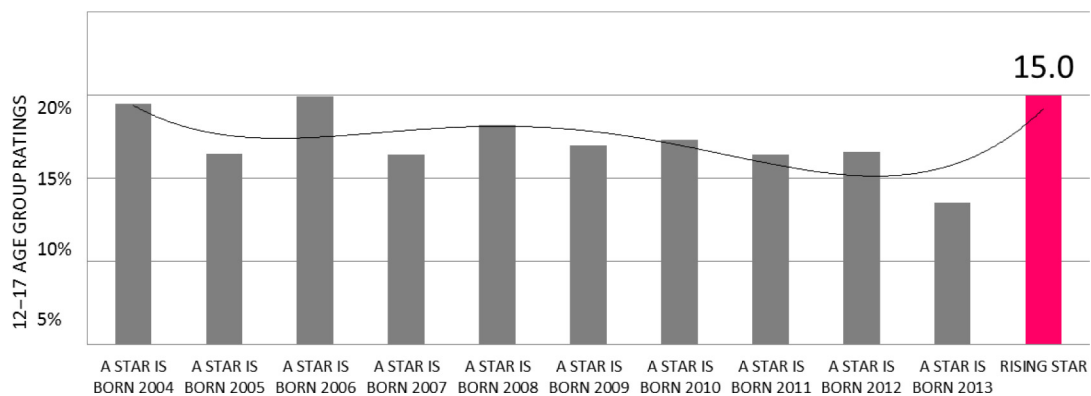


Figure 4. Average 12-17 demographic ratings per season.

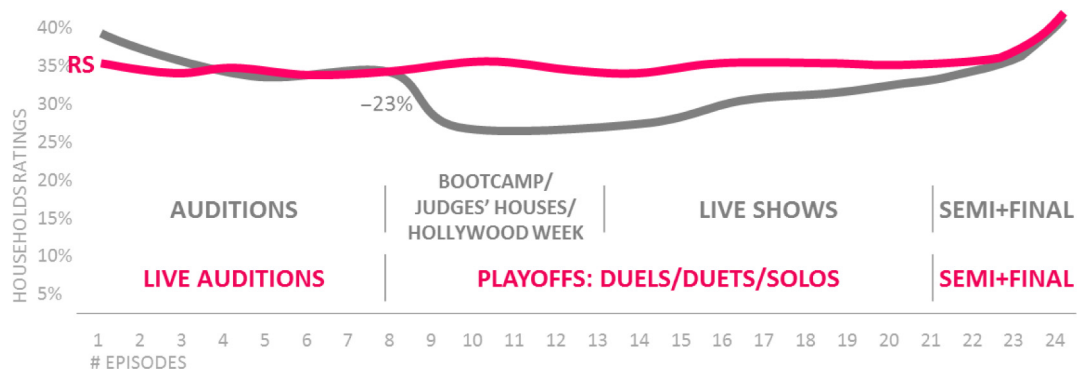


Figure 5. Average household ratings per episode throughout the season, compared to a general illustration of other Reality singing competitions broadcast in Israel in the same year (based on ASIB results.)

Video 1. *RS International Trailer* was produced as a marketing instrument to pitch the format. Basically this is a commercial done entirely to appeal to the hearts and minds of potential buyers. The trailer is mostly shown in private sales meetings (as the ones taking place in the MIPCOM market) or in professional assemblies (like the pre-market pitches). In these events channels' Heads of Programmes are watching roughly fifty different pitches a day, therefore yours must be the one that stands out. Go to the [online version](#) of this article to watch the video.

15 October 8th, 2013: Cannes, France

Keshet launched the format to the international market at Mipcom last night at a well-attended, exclusive, live screening of the broadcast from Israel.⁴²

It was a Tuesday, the second day of MIPCOM which also coincided with the latest instalment of *RS* in Israel. Keshet International's clients were all invited to a closed event at the Majestic Hotel where they were asked to watch a live *RS* telecast during which they were also instructed to download the *RS* app so that they could vote. One of the now-iconic, live screen tests began. Ultra-orthodox Jewish brothers, Gil and Arie Gat (*RS*, 1: 6) took the stage. Having only become orthodox later in life, the two siblings, each a father of six now, had not told a soul about their upcoming TV appearance. Strapped to their guitars, the brothers began a rendition of Simon and Garfunkel's *The Sound of Silence* whilst clad in traditional ultra-orthodox attire – a lasting image if ever there were one.

Video 2. The Amazing Rabbis Singing Simon and Garfunkel on YouTube. Go to the [online version](#) of this article to watch the video.

...all eyes are on the Israeli talent show *Rising Star*.⁴³

With focus gained at MIPCOM, the well-oiled, format distribution machine went into high gear. On the market's opening day, the press was already reporting the locking of *RS*'s first distribution deal in France with broadcast network, M6. Two more deals would soon follow with Russia's Rossiya1 TV channel and the biggest deal yet (at the time), with Germany's RTL.

Keshet International's runaway selling spree for international versions includes UK TV giant ITV, RTL in Germany, France's M6, Artesmedia in Spain, Globo network in Brazil, TVI in Portugal, Sony Pictures-controlled group Toro Produzioni in Italy, Rossiya1 in Russia, Nordisk for Scandinavia and Hungary's TV2 – making the 'it' format well on its way to become 2014's biggest global launch.⁴⁴

16 *Rising Star*: A Threat and an Opportunity

News of *RS* was spreading like wildfire. Headlines were touting its success and were soon challenging it to defy existing, dominant formats. Foreign producers were flying in to catch the programme's live telecasts.⁴⁵ The US's *The Hollywood Reporter* even ran an exclusive where it flat out asked, "Is Israel's *Rising Star* the Next **The Voice**?"⁴⁶ The piece sang *RS*'s praise, ruling that "Stellar ratings and unprecedented social media integration have made Keshet's singing competition the hottest new format in reality TV".⁴⁷ In the UK, *The Guardian* wondered: "Could *Rising Star* be the new **X Factor** for ITV?"⁴⁸ not shying away from poking the 'dragon' himself: "*Rising Star*'s sheer dynamism could end up causing [Simon] **Cowell** some sleepless nights... It dovetails perfectly with our second-screen viewing habits."⁴⁹

42 Source: [Keshet International official website](#).

43 Michael Idato, 'Israeli talent show *Rising Star* hopes to challenge **The Voice**', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 October 2013.

44 David Caspi, 'Israeli Singing Show '*Rising Star*' Scores Big Ratings in Finale,' *The Hollywood Reporter*, 25 December 2013.

45 Debra Kamin, 'Singing hopefuls and screaming girls', *The Times of Israel*, 7 November 2013.

46 Scott Roxborough, 'Is Israel's '*Rising Star*' the Next '**The Voice**'?', *The Hollywood Reporter*, 30 September 2013.

47 Ibid;

48 Ben Beaumont-Thomas, 'Could *Rising Star* be the new **X Factor** for ITV?', *The Guardian*, 28 November 2013.

49 Ibid.

17 *Rising Star*: International Versions

Brazil was the first to launch its own adaptation, *Superstar*, on Rede Globo. It premiered on 6th of April 2014, in concurrence with the biannual, Cannes MIPTV market. Going against any brand logic, Brazil insisted and was given permission to cast only musical groups. Their insistence paid off and despite a rocky start with a live app malfunction,⁵⁰ Brazil's *RS* adaptation would eventually become one of the franchise's most successful versions (a second season wrapped in July, 2015.)

RS was sold to ABC network. Selling your format to a US television network is the pinnacle of a format creator's dreams. However, it is also a double-edged sword. Win over the American audience and you will have a global hit on your hands with back-end revenues and multiple deals to follow. Strike out, and everything that had been achieved prior to the US version will be at stake. All eyes were now on the US launch.

Video 3. *Rising Star* US 'Live Test' Capsule. Go to the [online version](#) of this article to watch the video.

RS debuted in the US on 22nd of June 2014 at the height of the FIFA World Cup games in Brazil, where the USA's football team was enjoying great success. With the notable exception of *American Idol*'s first season which premiered in June 2002, not one of the other major players in the US Reality singing competition genre had ever attempted a summer cycle. Was *Rising Star US* setting itself up for disaster?

Another hurdle to overcome was the issue of the US's multiple time zones. How would *RS*'s crucial live-voting element accommodate the country's time differences? The solution was to let West Coast viewers watch a recording of the East Coast telecast while extending them the opportunity to get their live votes in and save contestants who had previously failed to raise the screen. All the contestants were kept at a small studio in order for their reaction to the West Coast results to be shown live.⁵¹

Video 4. *Rising Star*, Shameia Crawford Saved by West Coast, YouTube. Go to the [online version](#) of this article to watch the video.

RS premiered to 5.1 million viewers, earning a 1.5% rating with the 18–49 demographic. And while its launch was performed modestly at best, the programme did eventually go on to become ABC's highest-rated summer debut in two years.⁵² That being said, overall, the season saw a decline in numbers, wrapping with an average of 4 million viewers and a 1.54% demo rating. Digital numbers were solid, though not enough to help make the program a success.

The programme had tanked.⁵³ It had failed to deliver the hype it promised, inevitably leading to a negative buzz. The live voting novelty survived public scrutiny however "*Rising Star* as a show got a solid grade of C."⁵⁴ Overall, it was suggested that the talent pool was underwhelming, the expert panel, decorative at best whilst the host, singer Josh Groban (for whom this was his television hosting debut,) lacked the charisma and natural studio banter abilities so crucial to carrying a demanding format such as this.⁵⁵

Meanwhile, the deal struck with ITV, the UK's second largest television network proved a major milestone. Having earned a vote of confidence from the world's second most-coveted television market meant everything to the creators of *RS*.

50 Brazil, the first territory to adapt the format didn't perform the preliminary 'live test'. At the time KI was flexible with overseeing its brands rollout, being that it was the first time and that the company was at its infancy. The negative aftermath of the malfunction made them more demanding.

51 Cynthia Littleton, '[ABC's 'Rising Star' Juggles Time Zones to Allow for Live Voting](#)', *Variety*, 29 May 2014.

52 Breanna Hare, '['Rising Star': What's the verdict?](#)' CNN online edition, 23 June 2014.

53 Andrew Wallenstein, '[Why ABC's 'Rising Star' Failed to Gain Altitude](#)', *Variety*, 23 June 2014.

54 Lyndsey Parker, '["Rising Star" Gets It About 70 Percent Right](#)', *Rolling Stone*, 25 June 2014.

55 Andrew Wallenstein, '[Why ABC's 'Rising Star' Failed to Gain Altitude](#)', *Variety*, 23 June 2014.

The merging of British and Israeli creative forces promised to round out the format. Leaving no stone unturned, ITV development chiefs were making frequent trips to Keshet's Tel Aviv offices to further fine-tune and flesh out the format. But while ITV was touting its acquisition at home, the truth was that the network had never really quashed its doubts about the format. When the programme failed resoundingly both in the US and in Germany, ITV promptly backed out of the deal.⁵⁶

France's M6 that had been the first to acquire the *RS* format launched it on 25 September, 2014 to 3.8 million viewers – the channel's most successful debut since 2007.⁵⁷ The numbers however did not hold, and by week two, *RS* had shed a million of its viewers. Within weeks, numbers were down to a mere 1.5 million viewers, which in turn, led M6 to trim the programme's episode order by two. "*Rising Star* proved to be a tremendous success in terms of new technologies and social networks," M6 said in a statement. It "did not find a sufficiently large audience, but was hailed as a bold and innovative bet."⁵⁸

M6's adaptation was perhaps the saddest failure. No expenses were spared and the production surpassed even Keshet's original version. It seemed that all experience and knowledge gained up until that point went into the development and production of *RS*'s M6 version. Every element appeared to be in place and in top form: the set, the talent pool, expert panel, production crew, and so on. Therein perhaps lies the format's saddest story as its genius IT reformatting of the genre ended turning the spotlight directly onto *RS*'s ultimate failure to reinvent the narrative and premise of the Reality singing competition.

Video 5. *Rising Star* France, Emanuelle Robitaille "I Put A Spell On You", Audition en Direct, 26-09-14, YouTube. Go to the [online version](#) of this article to watch the video.

Not all was lost, though. In addition to Brazil, the format was also a success with audiences in Argentina, Hungary, Portugal, China and Indonesia. Also, in terms of a format's life span, future successes (and failures) in other territories are likely to follow. As much as one is eager to pin down an exact formula for cross-territory format success, such a formula, as of now, remains elusive. Also, neither the presence nor absence of a dominant format in the genre and markets it was launched, could have predicted the rise or fall of *Rising Star*.

Meanwhile, in Israel, *RS*'s second season was set to roll out and Keshet had decided to scale things back. Costs of the live premiere season, encapsulating its full-on 'digital estate' proved excessive to maintain. Many eyebrows were raised when it was announced that the *RS* second season will go back to pre-recording its auditions. Granted, the app was still involved, albeit on a far lesser scale. Was forfeiting the real-time live-app voting suggesting that the innovation narrative wasn't sufficient as the format's premise?

18 Conclusion

In his opening monologue, *RS US* host, Josh Groban says:

It's a completely new concept unlike anything you've ever seen; tonight we are going to change the way you watch television; we're about to do what no show has done before; put the power to find the next superstar in your hands instantly... Are you ready to find the next music super star?

These commonly-heard television hyperboles encapsulate the truth about *RS*. Admittedly, its employment of the live elements and the accompanying technology had been a first, as had the decision to hand viewers the power from day one. However, it most certainly did not change the way we watch television and above all else, failed to deliver on the

56 John Plunkett, 'ITV drops *Rising Star* talent show format,' *The Guardian*, 17 September 2014.

57 Nancy Tartaglione, '*Rising Star* France' Ratings: Magnifique Debut For M6', *Deadline Hollywood*, 26 September 2014.

58 Nancy Tartaglione, 'France's M6 To End '*Rising Star*' Early', *Deadline Hollywood*, 11 November 2014.

most crucial of fronts, namely shaking up the premise of the genre, whose quest to ‘*find the next music super star*’ had already begun 15 years earlier with *Idol*, *The X Factor*, and *The Voice*. Ultimately, *RS* failed in harnessing its technological novelties and transmedia-driven storytelling towards challenging and reinventing the genre’s most fundamental narrative premise.

A great deal of hindsight wisdom is to be had here. When *RS* debuted to great fanfare, boasting cutting edge, digital innovation, the scent of magic was in the air. Everyone believed they were looking at a game changer that would reshape the way we watch television. In terms of mass media ideology, *RS* also stood out as being subversive in allowing the individual at home to play an active role in shaping public discourse from the outset. The tech potential seemed limitless as people began conceiving of a future where even Parliament bills would be voted on using personalised TV/web apps, with the public able to chime in at any given moment. The greater question however, remains: can transmedia narratives or other digital novelties influence our storytelling patterns and tendencies to the point of wholly reimagining our existing dialogue with television?

Developing a television format is nothing if not a journey of trial and error. Having been so quick to launch in Israel and with their outmost attention dedicated to the format’s digital novelties, somewhere along the way *RS* chiefs had simply forgotten all about the narrative premise, leaving it no different to any of its other competitors. And while all the digital novelties touted an overarching coherent transmedia narrative from the very concept of the live auditions to viewer app-interactivity, at no point had anyone stopped to consider whether any of these cutting edge novelties were helping to revive the genre’s master narrative. And so, though initially hailed an earthquake within its genre, *Rising Star*’s great many novelties were not enough to surpass existing formats, and the programme ended up being no more than a hardly-felt tremour, ultimately failing to challenge the genre’s rule book or its powers that be.

19 Appendix A: Israel’s Television Landscape

A quick overview of Israel’s television landscape reveals three major broadcast networks currently in play: Public service broadcaster, IBA (most commonly known as Channel 1) which launched in 1968 and for many years was Israel’s sole television outlet until the launch of the country’s commercial networks, beginning with Channel Two (1993), and followed by Channel 10 (2002). Channel Two very quickly established itself as the nation’s top broadcast network with Channel 10 enjoying the occasional breakout hit. The latter however, in recent years has been grappling with ongoing financial difficulties which in turn, have led to its rebranding as a ‘serious’ network with a focus on news, documentaries and current affairs programming as opposed to original, scripted, entertainment-themed content. The early 1990s saw the arrival of multichannel television on various cable platforms, all of which would later go on to merge into HOT, Israel’s biggest cable television provider. HOT is currently in direct competition with YES, the country’s main satellite television provider, founded in 1998.

Public broadcasting corporation, IBA, once the nation’s exclusive television outlet, failed to catch up with the changing times and is currently in the midst of its biggest, most comprehensive structural overhaul to date.

Channel Two is co-operated by broadcast franchisers Keshet and Reshet with each having sole custody of different days of the week. The two, however, co-own the channel’s news company whose primetime edition airs nightly. Interestingly, Keshet and Reshet find themselves in direct competition on various fronts from advertising dollars to Media Buzz but never on ratings, as the two do not air against each other.

Despite multichannel television operators’ huge infiltration rates in Israel, the dominance of the country’s major broadcast networks has remained vastly uncontested in comparison to other competitive markets, worldwide. In 2015, the prime time viewing figures indicated that 54 percent went to the broadcast networks while the remaining 46% were split between cable and satellite. As of now, channel Two continues to maintain one third of Israeli primetime viewership (see [Figure 6](#)).

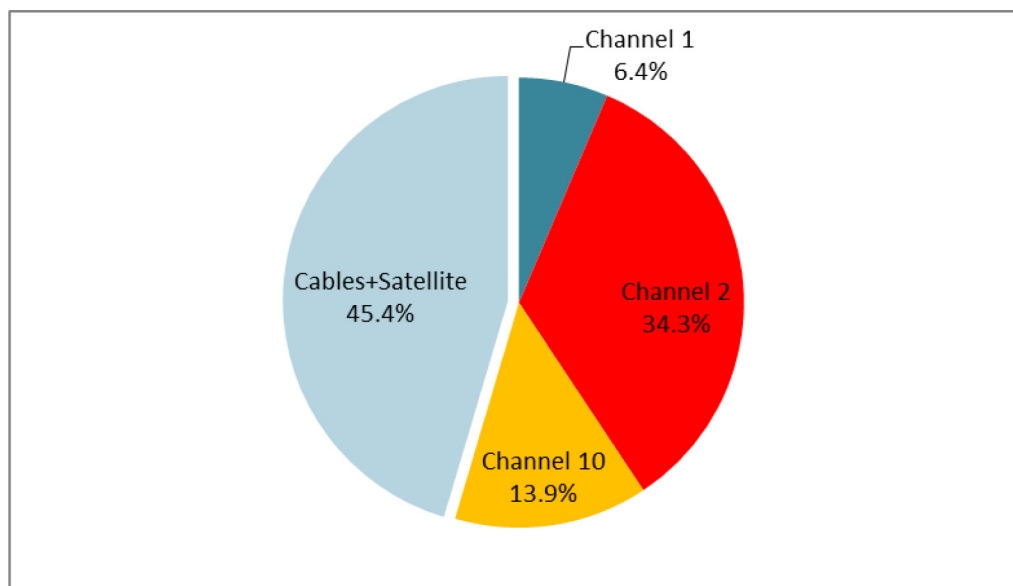


Figure 6. 2015 prime time (20:00–23:00) household-viewing-number shares divided between broadcast networks and multichannel operators. Data courtesy of Keshet Broadcasting, based on data provided by The Israeli Audience Research Board.

Biography

Merav Schiffmann is an experienced TV Creative Director, having worked in the Israeli television industry for the past two decades. Recently, Schiffmann parted ways with Keshet Broadcasting, Israel's leading, network television franchiser, where she served as Head of Innovation. During her 10-year tenure with Keshet, she gained comprehensive experience working with both traditional and digital departments. Schiffmann founded Keshet's New Media Research Division and was also Head of Audience Global Research and Insights for the network. Since going down the freelance route, she currently offers a wide range of designated research services to media companies, in addition to developing new formats, collaborating and working with local talent.