

The Search for “Real” Talent: *Pinoy Dream Academy* and *Philippine Idol* Jane O. Vinculado



Television Review
of *Pinoy Dream Academy* (ABS-CBN)
and *Philippine Idol* (ABC 5)

The term “reality television,” also known as factual programming, refers to a category of television programs that use non-professional actors, unscripted dialogue, surveillance footage, and hand-held cameras with events that are not staged but virtually unfold for the audiences (Hill, 2005). The genre is also characterized by the use of “camcorder, surveillance or observational ‘actuality footage’, first-person participant or eye-witness testimony, reconstructions that rely upon narrative fictional styles, commentaries from authoritative presenters and expert statements from emergency services personnel of psychologists (Dovey, 2001: 135).

As a genre, reality TV programs may be described as any “factual program based on an aesthetic style of using direct, unmediated account of events often associated with the use of video and surveillance techniques (Dovey, 2001: 135-137). Compared to the very distinct characteristics present in other genres like game shows and soap operas, the characteristics and the developments in the reality genre have allowed it to be open to numerous hybrids of the format. Reality television draws from existing genres and formats to create novel hybrid programs (Hill, 2005). The creation and re-creation of existing television formats have opened up reality television programs into combinations within these

real-life situations (Vinculado, 2001), allowing for a range of programs within the category like game shows, lifestyle, magazines and docu-soaps.

The development of reality programming in different broadcasting environments is also significant in understanding the genre. In the United Kingdom, most reality formats are related to public service and documentary ideas and practices, while most reality television in the United States is related to commercial and entertainment ideas and practices (Hill, 2005). The difference highlights the ‘cultural (sic) specific nature of reality programming and development of particular formats within different broadcasting environments (Hill, 2005: 8): Even programs like *Big Brother* and *Pop Idol* which are sold globally are located in specific countries’ cultural and production contexts (Hill, 2005).

Reality television has had a similar success in the Philippines, paving the way for the advent of several incarnations of the genre from the documentary-style reality, lifestyle reality, reality game and hidden camera-defined reality with several sub-categories within each classification (Sanico & Papa, 2006). Some of the most recent successes of the genre in Philippine television are the talent search reality programs like *Star Circle Quest* (ABS-CBN) and *Starstruck* (GMA-7) which fall under the reality game show category and the social-experiment game show reality program *Pinoy Big Brother* which can be categorized as a documentary-style reality program.¹

While most reality television programs in the Philippines have been locally produced and conceptualized, *Pinoy Big Brother* marks the entrance of foreign franchise programs within the reality genre. Foreign franchise programs are “programs that are being distributed in different countries while maintaining a similar format and where the right to reproduce this program is granted by the franchiser to the franchisee (Abundabar & Albay, 2006: 42).” Franchise programs are not new in the Philippines with the local success of game shows like *Family Feud*, *The Price Is Right*, *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire* and *The Weakest Link*.

The recent additions to Philippine television programming are the reality programs *Pinoy Dream Academy* (ABS-CBN) and *Philippine Idol* (ABC-5). Both programs fall under the reality genre and both are localized versions of foreign franchise programs. *Pinoy Dream Academy* is based on Endemol’s *Fame Academy* and *Philippine Idol* is a franchise of Fremantle’s *Pop Idol* which also came



Logos of some franchise programs aired on Philippine television.

out with the internationally successful *American Idol* franchise. While produced by different distributors and carried by different local stations, both programs showcase the singing and performing talents of young Filipinos. Much like most talent search reality programs, there is an elimination process that will eventually lead to an ultimate winner at the end of the season.

This paper intends to describe and characterize the talent-based reality programs *Pinoy Dream Academy* and *Philippine Idol* within the reality genre in the Philippines; examine their similarities and differences which characterize and categorize them within the sub-categories of the genre; and situate the two programs within two arguments: that despite having similar themes, processes and ultimate goals, the two programs differ in their characterizations within the reality genre spectrum in the Philippines, and that the content and nature of presentation of the programs are affected by the original programs from which they are derived as franchise programs.

Program Descriptions

Pinoy Dream Academy is a daily primetime television program aired in ABS-CBN. Audiences familiar with the program *Pinoy Big Brother* (also from ABS-CBN and franchised from Endemol) will notice several distinct similarities between this successful program and *Pinoy Dream Academy*. *Pinoy Big Brother*, based on the successful international franchise *Big Brother*, focuses on the premise of putting twelve strangers called *housemates* within the confines of a house called the PBB House for 114 days under constant camera surveillance with no contact from the outside world. They are given daily and weekly tasks by an omnipresent entity known as “Big Brother” or in the local vernacular, “Kuya.” The housemates undergo periodic evictions based on nominations by the housemates and the number of text votes sent by the audience. The ultimate winner is also decided by text votes from its audience (Abundabar & Albay, 2006).

Pinoy Dream Academy, on the other hand, is a daily program where 20 young Filipino performers called scholars are housed inside the *Academy* where they are trained to become all-around performers through lessons on voice, dance, diction, fitness, etc, until one of them is declared the ultimate performer and the winner of the program. Similar to the set-up of *Pinoy Big Brother* is the 24-hour, seven days a week presence of cameras in the entire *Academy*. They sleep, awake, eat and perform their day-to-day activities in the presence of cameras situated in the different areas of the *Academy*. Like *Pinoy Big Brother*, they are constantly exposed to situations that provide them stimuli to draw out their reactions. Inevitably, the different personalities of the *scholars* in the confined space of the *Academy* not only affect their actual performances but more so, their relationship to each other, inevitably putting added stress and drama to their situations. Every weekend, the *scholars* perform in front of a live audience, their instructors at the *Academy* and invited judges or jurors of the program. Aside from giving comments about the performances for the week, the judges/jurors are tasked to choose four nominees for eviction for the next week. In the initial stage of the program, the process of elimination of the program allows the audiences, via text voting to ‘save’ one nominee. The instructors of the program save another, and the *scholars* save a third nominee of their choice. The remaining “unsaved” scholar-nominee is evicted from the *Academy*. In

the last stages of the program, only the text votes of the audiences can save the nominee. The *scholar-nominee* with the least text votes is then evicted from the *Academy*.

Philippine Idol, on the other hand, takes its inspiration from the American version of the *Idol* franchise which follows the same process of auditions, theater eliminations, performance and results shows, semi-finals and finals. The program first highlights the auditions with glimpses of outstanding and mediocre *Idol* hopefuls with snippets of their stories and experiences before moving on to the more serious performances of the finalists. The basic format, including the theme music, opening billboards and logo of *American Idol* have also been retained.

The show, which airs every Saturday and Sunday night for the performance and results shows respectively, also taps three judges similar to its American counterpart. Musical composer Ryan Cayabyab, veteran singer Pilita Corales and rapper-producer Francis Magalona (or an occasional guest) make up the judges of the program while Ryan Agoncillo serves as its host (Abundabar & Albay, 2006). The process of elimination, relying on the text and phone votes from the audience, is the same as that of its American version.

Talent-Based Programs Within Philippine Reality TV Genres

There are two arguments that will be employed in the comparison of these two programs. The first argument is that despite having similar themes, processes and ultimate goals, the programs differ in their characterizations within the reality genre spectrum in the Philippines. The second argument posits that the nature of each of the programs within the structure they use as franchise programs of foreign material affect their content.

Using characteristics employed by Sanico & Papa (2006) to categorize Philippine reality television genres, *Pinoy Dream Academy* and *Philippine Idol*, despite focusing on similar themes, belong to different reality genre categories. *Pinoy Dream Academy* belongs to the Social Experiment-Game Show Reality sub-category under the Documentary-style category.

The documentary style reality genre has the following characteristics: it is unscripted, it has an observational documentary treatment, it has a template of events/situations that will transpire in the show, it has real-life locations/situations, it has cameras capturing the routines and details of the lives of



GMA's *Starstruck* and ABS-CBN's *Star Circle Quest* are examples of talent search reality programs.

participant-actors, it emphasizes on the drama element, it is based on the gain system, it has a stimulus component, and a testimonial or confession aspect (Sanico & Papa, 2006). Similar programs within this sub-genre include programs like *Pinoy Big Brother* and *The Exchange*. *Philippine Idol*, on the other hand, belongs to the Talent Search Reality sub-category under the Reality Television game show category. The characteristics of a reality genre are: It is unscripted or partly unscripted. It provides stimuli to participants. It has a more flexible and fluid format. It incorporates ordinary participants. It has an observational documentary treatment, it showcases particular talents as basis for the competition, and there are judges who criticize or explain their choices on the air. Content is incorporated in magazine format and it highlights the life story and background of the contestant (Sanico & Papa, 2006). Programs like *Starstruck*, *Star Circle Quest* and *Pinoy Pop Superstar* also belong to this sub-category .

The differences in genre classifications are manifest because of the treatment employed in the programs. In *Pinoy Dream Academy*, the focus is on the day-to-day activities and struggles of the scholars in the *Academy* instead of the weekly performances. The audience is hooked to the program through the daily narrative of their existence in this enclosed space. The performances presented in the weekend editions seem to provide only the opportunity to eliminate contestants and stimuli for the next week's episodes. There is also an extensive use of dramatic camera shots, angles and music within the program. Most of the program is devoted to the dramatics between the scholars, their instructors or teachers and sometimes, their families, audiences and strangers. Conflicts

abound in the situations that are present within the program. *Scholars* are usually put into situations where they are expected to have strong emotional reactions. While most of the situations created by the producers and the scholars' reactions to the situations are related to training for their performances, others are just meant to draw out varied emotions like anger, happiness, sorrow and fear. The program also employs the extensive use of voice-over narratives from the program's host. This device is employed to direct the attention of the audience to the circumstances each *scholar* goes through. The voice-over is also an effective means to summarize the events of the day or provide flashbacks of past occurrences in the *Academy* that would provide more drama for the present condition. The voice-over is a throwback to *Pinoy Big Brother*, where it is an effective means to further the narratives brewing in the program.

The program *Philippine Idol*, on the other hand, has a faster pace and is performance-oriented. The focus lies on the performances of the participants in the program, the process they go through for their performances and the comments of the judges. The camera shots employed are less dramatic and more frenetic, a quality that is evident in most reality programs. Music is employed mostly to summarize the events rather than to highlight dramatic moments. The program concentrates more on the humor than the drama of the situations presented. Though the families of participants are also incorporated within the program, their presence is minimal. Since the program is process-oriented, the audience is not expected to establish a connection with the participants until the finalists are presented. The focal point of the program, much like its other *Idol* counterparts, is on the judges rather than the participants. Similarly, the day-to-day activities presented by the program are minimal and do not reach the dramatic intensity of *Pinoy Dream Academy*.

Local Reality TV Genres as Foreign Franchise Programs

As local versions of foreign franchise programs, *Pinoy Dream Academy* and *Philippine Idol* need to adjust the foreign versions of the programs to be identifiable to its local audiences. Due to the differences in the treatments of both programs, *Pinoy Dream Academy* allows more leeway in the adjustment towards a more localized feel. The dramatic elements employed will have to take the audiences' shared knowledge,

experiences and expectations into consideration. It cannot use foreign concepts within the programs for fear of alienating the audiences who are integral to the success of the programs. The structure of *Philippine Idol* on the other hand limits the reinterpretation of the format for the Filipino audience. The process-oriented nature of the program limits the adjustments of the program for local content and context. Thus, it may be claimed that its over-all look and feel can still be ascribed to its foreign counterparts, particularly *American Idol*. *Philippine Idol* may also be the only franchised program in the Philippines where the audience has seen the foreign counterpart first before seeing the local version. This may be the reason why the program has not had the success of *American Idol* in the Philippines or other talent search reality programs like *Starstruck*, *Star in A Million* and *Search for A Star*. Working against *Philippine Idol* is something we may call *format fatigue*. Despite the fact that it is the local counterpart of a very successful international franchise, this reality genre category focusing on talent searches has been overexposed in Philippine television.

A similar format fatigue may also be working against *Pinoy Dream Academy*. Despite being part of the social-experiment reality genre, the themes of the program are also present in talent search reality programs like *Starstruck* and *Star in A Million*, a format that has existed in Philippine television for several years. The program also looks eerily similar to the much publicized and viewed *Pinoy Big Brother* series. Despite the new twist to this genre, audiences will have a difficult time telling the difference between the two programs because of the similarity in treatments and devices employed in both programs. Even the locations used in *Pinoy Big Brother* and *Pinoy Dream Academy* are similar. The *Academy* in *Pinoy Dream Academy* is obviously just a refurbished *Pinoy Big Brother* House.

Summary

At first glance, it is easy to assume that *Pinoy Dream Academy* and *Philippine Idol* belong to the same categories within the reality genre. After all, they have similar themes, goals and characteristics. A closer look of the programs however, indicates that these similarities are superficial. The difference in the treatment of the two talent-based programs has situated them into two very distinct and different positions

within the reality television spectrum in the country. *Pinoy Dream Academy* belongs to the Social Experiment-Game Show Reality category while *Philippine Idol* belongs to the Talent Search Reality category. Their differences are also affected by the original format of the foreign franchise programs on which the programs are based. *Pinoy Dream Academy* has more room to allow for cultural and local adaptations, while the rather rigid format of the *Idol* franchise limits the localization of the treatment of *Philippine Idol*.

The emergence and development of reality television programs in the Philippines indicate that Filipinos have embraced this worldwide phenomenon. While developing their own brand of reality television via original local programs within the genre, they have also crossed over towards developing programs based on foreign counterparts. There will always be a constant push and pull of both local, localized and foreign programming within the genre. Programs like *Pinoy Dream Academy* and *Philippine Idol* are by-products of such struggles, necessarily creating reinterpretations of successful foreign programs by incorporating local taste and expectations and previous successes within the genre.

Note

- ¹ These categorizations are based on the recent study conducted by Sanico and Papa (2006) which formulated the descriptions and characteristics of Philippine reality programs to classify them into categories and sub-categories within the genre.

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