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### The Rise of the Israeli Drama in a Global Market

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## The Rise of the Israeli Drama in a Global Market

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photo by Heather Sharkey

# The Rise of the Israeli Drama in a Global Market

*Danny Rubin*

## Introduction

Even though there are only 9 million people in the world who can speak Hebrew, Israeli television dramas have made inroads in the global market. This interest started in 2005 when American premium cable network HBO purchased the option to adapt the Israeli show *BeTipul*. *BeTipul* is a riveting drama that follows psychologist Reuven Dagan through his weekly meetings with his patients. HBO's adaptation, the critically acclaimed *In Treatment*, won a Primetime Emmy in 2008 and a Golden Globe in 2009.<sup>1</sup> More recently, the streaming provider Netflix has "gone truly Israeli," and

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now features twenty-two Israeli titles.<sup>2</sup> In 2016, Netflix purchased the Israeli show *Fauda* (Arabic for chaos), which follows an undercover Israeli Defense Force agent who comes out of retirement to hunt down a Hamas terrorist he thought he killed years ago.<sup>3</sup>

A question that is on the minds of many industry insiders, including a vice president at NBCUniversal, is why is this boom in media occurring in Israel?<sup>4</sup> This paper will argue that because Israeli producers are constrained by low budgets, they are required to reinvent production techniques, take more risks and think outside the box. As one fellow who studies the Middle East at the Council of Foreign Relations remarked, adversity breeds inventiveness.<sup>5</sup> Israeli writers and producers invent new storytelling mechanisms that focus on character development and that tap into authentic action-packed storylines.

There has been extensive discourse about the history of the telecommunications industry in Israel, but there is not much published work about the growth of the Israeli television industry<sup>6</sup> because it has only recently become a robust market. Even though the discourse is limited, this paper will use episodes of groundbreaking Israeli television shows along with several books and journal articles by renowned film and media studies experts. In particular, this paper will make use of a variety of books published recently about the topic, industry trade magazines such as *Variety*, important journals such as *Media, Culture and Society* and newspaper articles from *Bloomberg* and *The Economist*.

This paper will first provide a brief background about the beginnings of the Israeli television industry and how government regulation and incentives stymied and later encouraged growth. Additionally, there will be a background section about the growth and rise of two influential American drama distributors, HBO and Netflix. This paper will then look at two shows in particular as case studies: *Be Tipul* and *Fauda*. These two shows are of particular importance because they have impacted the Israeli television

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industry and contain multiple television drama firsts. *BeTipul*, with its innovative narrative structure, launched the industry's first major success story. After *In Treatment*, the original adaptation of *BeTipul*, aired in the United States, the show has been adapted into local spinoffs in more than twenty countries.<sup>7</sup> *Fauda* cemented Netflix's interest for Israeli television and is also the first Israeli show to be branded as a "Netflix Original Series."<sup>8</sup> By focusing solely on these two dramas, this paper will give a thorough analysis on how invigorating and original content from Israel can win global audiences.

### **The Israeli Television Industry**

Even though Israel is considered to be one of the most technologically advanced countries in the world, there are several reasons why a television broadcasting network was not created until the late 1960s. First, the Israeli cultural institutions originally rejected the idea of constructing a broadcasting network, because many Zionists believed that the penetration of television would result in a destruction of Zionist ideals.<sup>9</sup> Second, the Israeli economy was in a deep economic crisis throughout the 1950s and 1960s, because it struggled to absorb the mass of people immigrating to the Israeli state.<sup>10</sup> Television in its primitive stages was seen as a "luxury" item for wealthy countries, so it originally did not make sense for the frugal state of Israel to establish its own broadcasting network.<sup>11</sup> Finally, many members of the Knesset, Israel's legislative body, were worried about the political ramifications of television.<sup>12</sup> The turning point that put an end to arguments over establishing a broadcasting network in Israel was the Six-Day War in 1967.<sup>13</sup> The first program to ever be broadcast on Israeli television was a broadcast of Israel's 20<sup>th</sup> Independence Day celebration in 1968.<sup>14</sup>

The Israeli government initially passed several laws to strictly regulate the growth of television and built a British-like public broadcasting system.<sup>15</sup> This regulation started with an amendment to the Israeli Broadcasting Act in 1968 that gave an independent government organization, the Broadcast

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Authority, the right to oversee all television broadcasts in the state of Israel.<sup>16</sup> Israel's production houses barely produced any dramatic works for many years because of this strict oversight.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, the Israeli television business started at an inherent disadvantage because many Palestinian Israelis only spoke Arabic and could not watch any shows in Hebrew and because Ultra-Orthodox Jews often did not watch television at all.<sup>18</sup>

Starting in the 1970s and 1980s, there was a huge demand for the diversification of broadcasts and in 1990, the Knesset finally passed The Second Authority for Television and Radio. This legislation set up frameworks to grant licenses to commercial television channels.<sup>19</sup> The Broadcasting Authority was now required to distribute broadcasts in Arabic and to accurately represent the cultural diversity in the State of Israel.<sup>20</sup> In 1993, a commercial Channel 2 began broadcasting, and ended the monopoly of the state-run Channel 1.<sup>21</sup> Additionally, cable and satellite companies were finally allowed to sell subscriptions to Israeli consumers.<sup>22</sup>

Within a short period of time, Israeli consumers went from being single-channel viewers to multi-channel viewers and gained access to over 40 stations from across the world.<sup>23</sup> In 1999, a broadcasting license was issued to the satellite provider, and in 2005, all cable providers in Israel merged under the HOT brand.<sup>24</sup> The stage was now set for an intense competition between satellite and cable providers. This competition led to the creation of high-quality dramatic television for the first time in Israeli television history.

### **Home Box Office and Netflix: A New Way to Distribute Television**

In recent decades, the television drama has evolved from low-quality dramas, such as the ones produced in the 1950s and 1960s, to the high-quality artistic dramas that are shown on television today.<sup>25</sup> HBO has become an industry leader in providing the American public with high-quality television dramas. A premium cable network does not feature advertising and is free from the censorship regulations that commercial television usually has

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to follow. HBO relative freedom to deal with controversial issues allows the channel to distribute high quality television in a bold and socially subversive way.<sup>26</sup> The golden age of high-quality drama began in the 2000s with shows like *The Sopranos* and *The Wire*.<sup>27</sup> With these critically-acclaimed shows, HBO provided an authentic, innovative alternative to commercial television that follows their mantra: It's Not TV, It's HBO.<sup>28</sup> HBO was also one of the first television channels in the United States to look for adaptable international content such as shows like *BeTipul*, and kickstarted the international transfer and diffusion of television formats. *BeTipul*, for example, could not have been distributed on American commercial television, because the issues are too controversial and possess an artistic identity that does not interest the entire population. Since HBO has a different business model from much of commercial television, it makes perfect sense that it was the original landing spot for the show.<sup>29</sup>

The next step in the evolution of the high-quality television drama was the meteoric rise of streaming platforms. The American streaming provider Netflix started as a DVD distribution service in 1997. A decade later, Netflix started to offer a streaming platform that allows users to instantly watch television shows and movies directly on their computer.<sup>30</sup> By 2013, Netflix garnered thirty-one Emmy nominations that made it the first streaming provider to be nominated for an Emmy.<sup>31</sup> Many consider Netflix an industry disruptor because it started a completely new trend in television and created a new model for the distribution of shows to a viewer. The rise of Netflix and other streaming platforms has also led to an unprecedented need for content as the number of original scripted series produced has grown almost 71 percent in the last five years.<sup>32</sup>

Netflix typically does not produce its own original content and relies on establishing distribution deals with media companies in order to populate their platform with shows. Netflix plans to spend over 8 billion dollars in 2018 purchasing content for their platform and branding these purchased

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shows as “Netflix Originals.”<sup>33</sup> These series includes titles such as *House of Cards*, which was licensed at a price tag of \$100 million for just one season.<sup>34</sup> Netflix, however, cannot afford to purchase many of these shows so they now purchase local-language shows from abroad and add subtitles to them in order to appeal to American and international crowds.<sup>35</sup> For example, *Fauda* only cost Netflix a few million dollars, but has become a huge international success. Netflix proves that if a show is fantastic and compelling, then it does not really matter where it was created.<sup>36</sup>

### ***BeTipul: The Beginnings of a Robust Television Industry in Israel***

When *BeTipul* first aired in 2005, no one expected it to be the best-selling television format of all time.<sup>37</sup> Since then, *BeTipul* won virtually every television award in Israel and some critics consider it one of the most important drama series to ever be produced and the best Israeli television show ever.<sup>38</sup> The idea for *BeTipul* was conceived by Hagai Levi, who is the son of two therapists and studied psychology at an Israeli university.<sup>39</sup> In creating the concept of *BeTipul*, Levi used his own experience as a psychologist, which gives the show its sense of authenticity. Furthermore, this concept was used because of Levi’s desire to make a show so cheap that no one could tell him what to do.<sup>40</sup> *BeTipul* takes place entirely in a therapy clinic and follows patients through their treatment over a nine-week period.<sup>41</sup> *BeTipul* was produced and released by HOT3 and consisted of eighty episodes over the course of two seasons.<sup>42</sup> The HBO version, *In Treatment*, had a three season, 106 episode run.<sup>43</sup> *BeTipul* and *In Treatment* are essentially “shows of talking heads,” meaning you have two people in a room just talking to one another.<sup>44</sup> There is no fancy cinematography or overarching conflict and the whole show is filmed in a single location.<sup>45</sup> This paper will attempt to answer Levi’s questions by arguing that *BeTipul* is still quite suspenseful because of its innovative and authentic narrative structure that effectively de-stigmatizes the art of therapy.

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*BeTipul's* groundbreaking structure and format has been adapted many times because it is one of the only television dramas that blends a soap opera programming schedule with the prestige of a high-quality production.<sup>46</sup> *BeTipul* and *In Treatment* ran five nights a week, with a single episode each day from Monday through Friday.<sup>47</sup> This schedule was modeled on how a psychotherapist typically runs a practice, and also meant that the viewer could see the therapy session of their favorite patient on the same day every week.<sup>48</sup> *BeTipul* is one of the first shows to master a multi-storyline approach with only two of the series' narrative threads interwoven with each other.<sup>49</sup> This structure also gives the viewer a choice to watch every episode in sequence chronologically or just follow one particular character's storyline.<sup>50</sup> *BeTipul's* unique narrative structure demands an immense focus and commitment from the viewer, but in return, the show grants the viewer something more than the average television show.<sup>51</sup>

*BeTipul* also excels at providing an engaging portrait of contemporary psychology by portraying therapy sessions quite authentically. One psychologist who has practiced psychology in both Israel and the United States feels that *BeTipul* gives the viewer an idea of what a psychotherapy session looks like and accurately shows the strong and weak points of psychotherapy.<sup>52</sup> The website *Hebrew Psychology* also praised the show for being "the most significant convergence of the realms of drama and therapy to date."<sup>53</sup> Prior to the show, no television show realistically portrayed a psychoanalysis session.<sup>54</sup> When psychoanalysis was portrayed in television and in cinema, it often focused on the juicy bits such as shocking revelations about one's past.<sup>55</sup> *BeTipul* breaks from these past trends as the show focuses primarily and almost exclusively on the process of therapy.<sup>56</sup>

An incredible effect that *BeTipul* has in every nation where the show is adapted is that the population take therapy more seriously and the number of patients in therapy increases significantly.<sup>57</sup> When Levi created *BeTipul*, he wanted to fill the void of two characteristics that are often missing from

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television. First, *BeTipul* finally provides the viewer with a fresh concept as the show does not rely on lying or deceit like other show on television.<sup>58</sup> Instead, *BeTipul* is a refreshing departure because it is entirely about telling the truth. Second, *BeTipul* is a show that does not rely on action, but focuses exclusively on the dialogue. The dialogue in *BeTipul* is written beautifully, is engaging, and reflects how therapy is actually practiced.<sup>59</sup> *BeTipul* is so effective not only because it is a gripping show, but also because it paints therapy in a positive light and is one of modern psychotherapy's best advocate.<sup>60</sup>

### ***Fauda*: Another Israeli Television Industry First**

After binge-watching the show on Netflix, the renowned American author Stephen King tweeted that *Fauda* was “all killer and no filler.”<sup>61</sup> *Fauda* originally aired in 2015 on the Israeli channel Yes and easily became the most watched show ever on the channel.<sup>62</sup> Since it was picked up by Netflix in 2016, *Fauda* has spread to the United States as well as a hundred ninety other countries worldwide.<sup>63</sup> *Fauda* was the brainchild of two Israeli citizens: Lior Raz, a former counterterrorism operative who stars as one of the show's main characters, and Avi Issacharoff, an esteemed journalist who has covered the Israeli-Palestinian conflict for many years.<sup>64</sup> *Fauda* follows the journey of an elite undercover counterterrorism unit in the Israel Defense Forces as they attempt to hunt down a notorious Hamas leader.<sup>65</sup> The show is also incredibly action-packed and includes many spellbinding twists that leave the viewer in suspense.<sup>66</sup>

At first, many network executives in Israel thought the show would be a dud because many Israelis have gone numb to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.<sup>67</sup> Other network executives rejected the show as they considered it radical because of its even handling of the Israeli and Palestinian perspectives.<sup>68</sup> Despite these reservations, *Fauda* is considered an eye-opener to viewers because it humanizes Palestinian terrorists and effectively uses parallel storytelling to show two opposing storylines.<sup>69</sup>

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*Fauda* is a television first because no broadcast ever produced thoroughly mixed Hebrew and Arabic dialogue and the settings of Tel Aviv and Ramallah.<sup>70</sup> This dual language approach is the reason why *Fauda* is one the first Israeli shows on television that resonated with Palestinians in both the Gaza Strip and the West Bank.<sup>71</sup> The show has also helped the Palestinian community understand that Israeli soldiers are not just enemy combatants but characters with siblings, children and love affairs.<sup>72</sup> The same can be said about the other communities as Raz noticed that some Israeli viewers now want to learn Arabic after watching the show.<sup>73</sup> He believes that this outcome is fantastic because Arabic can be used as a bridge of peace.<sup>74</sup>

In order to develop storylines that delve into both sides of the conflict, *Fauda* presents multi-dimensional characters with no clear protagonist or antagonist. These characters provides the viewer with a window into the pain of both the Israeli and Palestinians.<sup>75</sup> At the beginning of the series Abu Ahmed, or The Panther, is originally thought to be dead, but it is revealed in the first episode that he is still alive and plotting his revenge against the Israeli state.<sup>76</sup> Doron is a retired Israeli special-forces commander who lives on a vineyard with his two kids and his wife.<sup>77</sup> When Doron hears that Abu Ahmed, a man he thought he killed years ago, is still alive, he agrees to rejoin the undercover unit in order to finish what he started.<sup>78</sup> These characters all start with complex backstories, but throughout the show, they deal with personal battles and grow more complex. For example, Doron, who the viewer might consider the “protagonist,” is portrayed as compellingly imperfect.<sup>79</sup> Beside the main characters of the show, the viewer is also exposed to the extended family of Abu Ahmed and ordinary Palestinians that suffer through the Israeli occupation.<sup>80</sup> In showing a terrorist’s extended family, *Fauda* is truly the first mainstream show ever to show compassion to Palestinian terrorists, and although the viewer may not believe in their actions, the viewer is still able to see that these characters are humans who love and who have kids.<sup>81</sup> *Fauda* is a television first because soldiers on both sides of the conflict are

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treated with empathy and shown as complex individuals who are trapped in an ugly conflict that they did not create.<sup>82</sup>

*Fauda* also excels at providing an authentic, action-packed storyline that keeps the viewer engaged through all twelve episodes. Arguably, what makes these storylines so authentic is that they stem from real life situations. This authenticity is evident in a riveting scene in the third episode. Amal, whose husband is killed in the first episode by the Israeli unit, wants to avenge his death by bombing a Tel Aviv nightclub.<sup>83</sup> Between the two moments when she enters the club and the attack is carried out, the viewer is kept in suspense and time is fraught with tension and anticipation.<sup>84</sup> Amal eventually triggers the bomb, but stays inside the nightclub instead of escaping as planned. A victim of the attack is the girlfriend of one of the show's central characters. This storyline was derived from Raz's life directly because his girlfriend was also killed by a Palestinian terrorist when he was serving in the military.<sup>85</sup> This storyline gives this incredible moment in the plot a sense of authenticity and particular strife. *Fauda's* storyline resonates with audiences around the world because it is among the first shows to be brutally honest about the ugliness of war and the complexities of human life.<sup>86</sup>

### **Conclusion: *BeTipul* and *Fauda* Are Just the Start**

Israel, a country that is usually recognized as a political powder keg with cultural and religious strife, has now firmly positioned itself as a TV content breeding ground.<sup>87</sup> Even two decades after the advent of commercial television in Israel, the Israeli television production field is still evolving and undergoing processes of institutionalization.<sup>88</sup> *Fauda* illustrates yet another transformation because Israeli television is now being recognized as a high-octane content machine.<sup>89</sup> This content machine increasingly relies on Israeli producers' ability to sell their product across the world. In particular, production houses such as Yes, HOT and Keshet have found that to see a return on their investment, the format or the fully-produced show

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needs to cross over to a broader market.<sup>90</sup> In order to see this return, Israeli producers have been wise and “stack the odds in their favor.”<sup>91</sup> By having low initial budgets, series can be remade on small budgets as well, which has ensured a record number of adaptations for *BeTipul* and other Israeli shows.<sup>92</sup> Furthermore, Israeli producers tend to be flexible and allow buyers to make changes as long as they keep the essence of the show.<sup>93</sup> The bottom line is that the producers of the Israeli television industry have become effective at creating memorable and relatable content. As the head of television at one of America’s largest talent agencies remarked: “the issues are universal and the characters are compelling.”<sup>94</sup>

The Israeli television industry will become increasingly beneficial and important for Israeli society as a whole because it has become a major venue for Israelis to communicate their commentary and criticism about their country.<sup>95</sup> Not only does the newly successful television industry affect the Israeli economy, but the Israeli public has recently become very proud of its television industry. Specifically, every time *BeTipul* is reproduced or another show is sold to television providers across the world, the whole nation takes pride that the show stemmed from their country.<sup>96</sup> Additionally, in times of war or national disaster, which unfortunately the state of Israel will most likely have to endure at some point in the future, television still acts as a unifying platform for getting information and fostering a national identity.<sup>97</sup> Finally, as streaming becomes increasingly important, Israelis have a leg up on many of its competitors, because of the ability to adapt to changes in the media landscape. Because of the content they have already produced, Israel will be an industry player that creates innovative television concepts for years to come.

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Danny Rubin is a sophomore in Wharton from New York City. Who knew a Wharton kid can do anything beside discounted cash flows?

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