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MARKETPLACE

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HEADLINE: Saudi PR ads in US; "Star Wars" spoofs contest

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BODY:

DAVID BRANCACCIO, anchor:

Here to check the nexus of media meets business is our man, Martin Kaplan, associate dean of the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Southern California.

Hello, Marty.

MARTIN KAPLAN (Annenberg School for Communication, USC): Hello, David.

BRANCACCIO: All right. Look, I serve; you volley. What do you say?

KAPLAN: It's a deal.

BRANCACCIO: Saudi Arabia has an image issue in the US. A bunch of the September 11th hijackers are Saudi citizens, and some pundits accuse the Saudis of not being forthcoming enough about some of the stuff. Now the Saudis have hired a PR firm.

KAPLAN: And they're spending about \$10 million airing four television ads and three radio ads in a number of markets around the country to improve their image.

BRANCACCIO: 'Saudis, allies for peace' kind of ads.

KAPLAN: Yes. The problem is that they don't have an image problem; they have a problem problem. Saudi Arabia is a country that has exported terrorists, and they are an uncertain ally--they would argue otherwise--in issues of the Middle East--terrorism, oil and so on. And instead of focusing on that and their internal problems in the attempts to liberalize their domestic situation, have decided to go for America via a PR campaign, trying to show us through fuzzy, warm ads that they're marvelous and embraceable.

BRANCACCIO: Now some of the cable TV networks have refused to air them, so they bumped into one problem there.

KAPLAN: Yes, who can blame them? Imagine watching your favorite show on Lifetime, and then seeing a pro-Saudi ad. You can imagine a viewer saying, 'Wait a minute. Didn't all those terrorists come from that country?' and wanting to change the channel. Obviously, there are issues of economic boycotts, First Amendment rights and that sort of thing, but by and large, I think it's been shown that television stations can decide what ads they want to air.

BRANCACCIO: This week, the TV show "JAG" did a fictionalized look at what military trials of suspected terrorists might look like. What do you suppose, Marty? Does pop culture, fiction, inform the debate in any real way?

KAPLAN: Well, in this case, the people who made that show got more access to the Pentagon's military tribunal planners than the press did. If you're a reporter and you want to do a story about what a military tribunal would be like, the answer is, 'Excuse me, we can't talk to you.' But if you're a television show doing what appeared to be a sympathetic portrayal, then, in fact, they got full access and lots of coaching from the inside.

BRANCACCIO: Now we have to mention this, on a different subject, did you see "Star Wars" director George Lucas? He had this idea--someone did on his staff--for a little contest. He would allow amateur filmmakers to make "Star Wars" spoofs. But there are rules. Some spoofs not permitted.

KAPLAN: Yes, spoofs that actually use the characters are not permitted. George Lucas will watch the ones which are parodies and work around the material, but ones which take the digitized images from the "Star Wars" movies and turn them into new material would be prosecuted under the copyright laws. This goes back to the notorious "Star Wars: Phantom" cut. There is a guy called the 'Phantom Editor' who went to "Star Wars: Episode I" and did a version without the much-loathed Jar Jar Binks, taking 20 minutes out of the movie, making many people believe a much better one. And Lucas and Lucasfilms said, 'No, you can't do that. This is our intellectual property.'

The problem is that culture depends on some kind of intellectual commons, a relationship between material and people who adapt and remake the material. There's a balance to be struck. Obviously, copyright does provide protection for owners of that material, but in the case of the Lucas enterprise, when it gets a little too close to the bone, they squeal with horror, and when it advances the marketing goals of the new "Star Wars," they're delighted to let the stuff go.

BRANCACCIO: But help me here: Is the bright line just don't take the digitized images from the film as it now exists and adapt it? If I dress up as Darth Vader in a little movie, that's OK?

KAPLAN: Yes, in some instances, and no in some others. And I think it's at the discretion of the legal representatives of Lucasfilms to decide where the line is crossed or not.

BRANCACCIO: (As Darth Vader) Marty, thanks. Media and business commentator Martin Kaplan is also director of the Norman Lear Center at USC.

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