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# THE GLOBALIZATION OF TV FORMATS

*Anthony Fung*

Cultural industry produces cultural products that are sold globally on a massive scale. There is a very unique – perhaps a more advanced form of – cultural industry that, however, does not produce and reproduce cultural products, but sells and transfers know-how and idea: it is the global trade and franchising of production and circulation of television formats. Television format business is the trading of a package of copyrighted calculated formula and well-planned concept for a television programme that is readily adapted to different cultures. In other words, quite different from our traditional understanding of cultural industries such as film, animation or music industries, the core business of which rests on its creativity, production and then its distribution, the television format trade is a secondary level of (re)production. It starts out with a source of knowledge and creative production of the original televised format, which is then ensued by a more complex and long process of cultural adaptation and localization of the knowledge in different locales under different contexts. As it has shown, while many adapted television formats largely follow the structure and flow of the original format design, there are some television formats that are vastly modified to cater for local taste, advertisers and political context.

In the last ten years the trade in television, or TV, formats has become extremely active, partly because of the proven popularity of the formats, and partly because television stations across the world are in extreme need of quickly produced television content that fills up the air time, in particular in Asia where the number of channels has increased exorbitantly as the economy has risen. With the ever-increasing popularity of TV formats that travel globally, there is a concomitantly growing number of publications on TV formats. Among them, most studies have conceived and classified TV formats as an emerging and popular genre of television that creates local and global impact by various means of local adaptation, and hence it becomes a cultural form of globalization. While such descriptions are in general correct, globalization of TV formats is relatively a new phenomenon in the history of television, and therefore a more accurate trajectory of approach and framework of studying TV format is still under exploration.

The study of TV formats has undergone two decades of change. In retrospect, it was common to see that the studies of television formats were mainly case analyses or examination of a particular television format (e.g. reality TV) that is prevalent worldwide. Initially, it was usually singled out as an individual phenomenon; it was usually incorporated into the field of the television studies, which are customarily textual and qualitative analysis of the specific genre, and sometimes broadly include discourse study of the television programme, its production and distribution processes, and the connection between television and society, culture and politics. In a professional journalism school, the study of television formats is also of practical concern in terms of the skills and techniques of television production and so on.

Later, as TV formats, in particular reality TV, have become more prominent, their study is not just confined to a detailed analysis of their nature and content. Cultural theories were being applied to the study of reality TV: a broader perspective about how TV formats are being connected to the social and cultural context can be seen, probably, in a second stage of development. The sort of mediated construction in which actors are arranged and subjected to perform precisely in reality TV becomes what cultural theories have to deconstruct. From a political economy perspective, studies (e.g. Pozner, 2010) offer a critical dimension to the so-called communicative capitalism: is the programme accountable to the consumers? Does TV evolve into a new form that effectively deludes audience? Is it simply a new and extended capitalist way to manipulate reception? Jodi Dean (2009) defined “communicative capitalism” as “a political-economic formation in which there is talk without response, in which the very practices associated with governance by the people consolidate and support the most brutal iniquities of corporate-controlled capitalism” (p. 24). Compared with “industrial capitalism”, which “relied on the exploitation of labor”, “communicative capitalism” extends the exploitation to viewers and thus maximizes capitalists’ business interest. Meanwhile, Dean pointed out that despite the proliferation and commodification of digital technologies, which has created new platforms for audiences to express their view, the communication facilitated is often “unresponsive” and “non-inclusive”. In other words, communications technology is more about creating a “fantasy of participation” than serving democratic functions. The political aspect of media is overtaken by the commercial side. On the other hand, from a cultural studies perspective, studies question the programme’s accountability to the consumers: reality TV reassembles the dominant narratives and social discourses of comical showbiz, and in turn it constitutes another form of panoptic surveillance for the audience to abide with (Andrejevic, 2003). Besides, the constructed reality in reality TV that fits the consumerist demand could perpetuate and reinforce cultural biases about gender, race and class (Pozner, 2010).

Television formats have received more attention in academia perhaps because of the globalization of the reality TV format. The trend of studying reality TV (e.g. Murray and Ouellette, 2008; Pozner, 2010) has in fact become one of the rejuvenating drives of television studies in this post broadcast era (Turner and Tay, 2009), and this trend has continued, matching reality TV’s ongoing popularity. Turner and Tay (2009) studied how the role of television changed and they identified its shift from “broadcast era” to “post broadcast era”. In “broadcast era”, television had an education role in advocating democracy, cultivating national identity and highlighting

important information to the public. And yet, as the commercial interest of media carries more weight, the television industries face an increasingly complex environment driven by audience fragmentation, programme diversification, rise of new media and multi-platform television. As the audience segments in the “post broadcast era” are fragmenting and content is distributed across channels, independent production companies are also given a chance to find their niche market. In TV format productions, most of the popular ones are produced by media giants in the United States and Europe. Besides academic work, trade books on reality TV also proliferate. Author Michael Keneski even published a guide, *Survivor: The Unofficial Bible of the Greatest Reality Show Ever Made* (2011), which summarized how finalists won different seasons of the reality TV show *Survivor*. Participants of some reality shows, *The Bachelor* for example, have also published books based on their experiences. For instance, Courtney Robertson, who joined the sixteenth season of *The Bachelor*, wrote *I Didn't Come Here to Make Friends: Confessions of a Reality Show Villain* (2015) in which she documented her psychological journey of joining a reality show, in which women are expected to compete for the chance to win the heart of America's most ideal man. In addition to trade books, the study of reality show has become an area of research interest. Take feminist journalist Jennifer L. Pozner's *Reality Bites Back: The Troubling Truth About Guilty Pleasure TV* (2010) for example: Pozner observed a pattern in reality television, which attracts audiences by playing around with misconceptions and stereotypes such as sexism, racism and homophobia. Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette's *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture* (2008) is another example. Murray and Ouellette pointed out that the representation on reality TV, which appears “real” and “authentic”, is a socially constructed situation. And the birth of this TV genre has changed the dynamics among producers, participants and viewers. The study of the globalization of television format has emerged as the second stage of systematic study.

It is only recently that we have seen TV formats treated as a globalized cultural form under the operation and production of cultural industries, in which the entire circuit of culture, content adaptation, ideological control, market potentials and the expression of cultural identity can be examined with critical reflection. In terms of geopolitical concern, the study of globalization of format initially focused on the UK or US produced formats in Asia (Iwabuchi, 2003 in Japan; Khalil, 2004 in the Middle East) and other non-Anglo-Saxon countries (Hetsroni, 2004; Jensen, 2007 in northern Europe), in which these formats are locally adapted and modified, and making local impacts. Roughly around 2010, studies of television formats have gradually entered into an epoch of synthesis and crystallization in which the structure, production and output are studied within a framework of globalization (Keane et al., 2007; Cooper-Chen, 2005; Moran, 2009). For example, Keane et al. (2007) examined the flow and circulation of television in Asia and described how some television “ideas” were directly cloned and copied in this immature format trade in Asia, and yet still were immensely popular. These studies detail the adaptation process of television formats, which in turn reflects how the issue of dialectics between localization and globalization, contradiction of the television content and the indigenous values, or the global and the local are resolved. In sum, this phase of study of the globalization of TV formats starts to explicitly or implicitly consider it within a framework of

cultural industry in which the interaction between state and policy, media, content and local adaptation, audience and market are examined (Chalaby, 2010, 2012; Gutiérrez Lozano, 2010). With a more comprehensive approach to the study of media, both the regulatory role of the state and the connection between television content and local identity are further explored.

### What is a television format?

Until now, television formats have been loosely defined or widely misunderstood. Some media and production houses package and design formats and sell the ideas as a “blue book”, and additionally, and seemingly more commonly, ideas for programmes are copied and imitated illicitly. But from a cultural industries point of view, a television format is basically a commercial and global strategy for designing, producing and distributing a copyrighted concept and branding of a television programme or show. The globalization of television formats involves their adaptation in different parts of the worlds, with formats converted and modified to suit the local context and language.

Across the world, major production companies include the Italian-based Mediaset’s Endemol, Bertelsmann’s FremantleMedia, Mexican multimedia company Grupo Televisa, Germany’s Red Arrow Entertainment Group, to name but a few. The more renowned and successful formats include reality TV, dating shows, other competition-based formats and some specific TV drama formats (including the comedy drama *Yo Soy Betty*, *La Fea*, firstly produced in Colombia). With the ever-increasing expansion of global capitalism, and in different nation-states, with the increased privatization of media service and even with the commercialization of state-owned media in authoritarian regimes, the adaptation of existing packaged TV format has slowly become a regular and popular way of television programming and production routines. What we have seen are different national versions and variations of *Big Brother* and *Pop Idol*, and internationally, the adapted format of *Australian Survivor*, the Chinese version of *Ugly Betty*, Korea’s own version of *Take Me Out!* and *Love Switch!*, Japan’s production of *The Weakest Link* and Indonesian remakes of *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?*, amongst others. Apart from the legally acquired franchised formats, there are numerous cloned version of the format or television programme using similar ideas, ranging from the make-over of China’s *Supergirl* (a combination of the *Big Brother* and *Pop Idol* format) to dating show like Singapore’s *Angel Gate* (which uses a similar format to *Dragon’s Den* and *Shark Tank*); such cloned formats are found not only across Europe and the United Kingdom but also reaching Asia in the current era of globalization.

In fact, TV format adaptations are also popular in the European market. Take *The Voice of Holland*, for example: it is a reality show featuring a singing contest, which seeks to identify aspiring singers with musical talents. The United States revised the concept and developed *The Voice*. Interestingly, this TV format returned to Europe again and became one of Europe’s top five formats in 2012, creating \$126.9 million (Kemp, 2013) in value across the region. *The Million Pound Drop Live*, a game show first developed in the United Kingdom, is another example. In the United States

several changes were made to this concept and *Million Dollar Money Drop* was developed. This TV format generated \$213.4 million and was the top format in Europe in 2012. Apart from reality TV shows, there are several TV dramas with the same TV format. For example, *Queer as Folk* was a British television series featuring the life of three gay men in Manchester. The series was broadcasted in the United Kingdom in 1999 and 2000. This concept was revised and incorporated into a co-production between the United States and Canada. The US–Canadian version of *Queer as Folk* was set in Pittsburgh and featured more characters, and the series was broadcasted from 2000 to 2005.

The adaptation of programme formats in television systems across the world has become a regular media trade and a common strategy for media stations. The trend is most likely precipitated by the new communication technologies (e.g. digitalization of television) that drive programme and market needs, the trend of the privatization of services and the blooming of television broadcasting in Asia and in developing countries. The study of the phenomenon of global television format is thus conceived as the analysis of the stages and processes – efficiently or contradictorily – in which this specific mediated form of cultural globalization or commodity is created, marketed and distributed by the operation of global capitals and distributors and transnational production companies in global trade and markets, and finally how the format knowledge, design or ideas are being (re)produced by and broadcast on local media. In addition to the process of localization, the issues examined may include the policy of the state, the strategy and position of the media that localize the format, regulation of and contracts for remaking the format, the concept of copyright and intellectual property, and piracy (Moran and Malbon, 2006). The issues may cover political, cultural, economic, organizational and legal dimensions of the television format.

### **Globalizing formats and global culture**

The globalization of television formats not only represents this increasing global trade business. The globalizing of television formats results in cultural globalization, to some extent homogenizing culture and values, namely capitalism, liberalism, gender values, consumerism and cosmopolitanism across the globe. García Canclini (1995) points to cultural hybridity as a key dimension of cultural globalization. The terminology “hybridity” highlights globalization as an ongoing process of mediation between global culture and local cultures. To apply this concept to media studies, the underlying question is how transnational media serves as a key engine to facilitate the process and to bring foreign cultural elements in different local contexts and vice versa. Empirical studies in global television studies actually have provided strong evidence of the globalizing trend. For example, in a study of the US television schedules from the 2007–8 broadcast season, Andrea Esser (2010) revealed a high share of formatted programming in primetime schedules (which accounts for 33 per cent of broadcast time). Inevitably, the enormous volume of the television format also signifies the increasing drive for media and production companies to create formats. On the one hand, this trend of producing and franchising its intellectual property contributes to the convergence of television globally, not just structurally but also in terms of

concrete, albeit locally modified content (Esser, 2010). On the other, when formats are well-received, it sparks the production and selling of the formats in a larger industrial scale, which enables television formatting to evolve into a form of cultural industries.

In this global circulation of television format, beyond the cultural product itself, their concern on global trade and operation has slowly converged with studies on cultural industries.

Besides this global trend – meaning that the global format production houses manufactured formats and exported them overseas – cloning, circulation and franchising of television formats is also at works, which constitutes somewhat the so-called Inter-Asia cultural flow. *Meteor Garden* is an example. It is a comic story that originated in Japan, written and illustrated by Yoko Kamio, describing the love story happening among the four boys from well-off families and a girl from a humble background in an elite high school. The comedy was adapted into four versions of TV dramas: Taiwan, Japan, South Korea and China. The comedy was first adapted into drama by Taiwan, named *Meteor Garden*, which created and guided the fashion of *Youth Idol Drama* as the pioneer of Taiwan to broaden their overseas market. The TV drama achieved a huge commercial success with a minimum of 500 million viewers across Asia, according to the producer. F4, the four casts in the drama, also gained popularity and created a trend of Young-Boy-Idol group in Taiwan. This TV format was later adapted by South Korea (named *Boys Over Flowers*), Japan (also named *Boys Over Flowers*) and China (named *Let's Watch the Meteor Shower*). All versions not only achieved economic viability but also reshaped the idol star market across the region.

Currently the study of global TV formats focuses on reality television formats, which are more prevalent worldwide. Therefore, probably what is not emphasized is the initial creation of the franchised format that might come out of a small production company. While transnational production companies dominate the market, it is also true that the globalization of information flows within the TV industry is as important as the independent production sector in sustaining this value chain of the globalization of the TV format business (Chalaby, 2010).

### **Emerging concepts in creative industries**

Under the framework of creative industries, new issues and concerns over the globalization of television formats emerge.

#### ***Interactivity***

Interactivity used to refer only to the interaction between the audience and the actor in the reality or game show in formatted programmes. Now the framework of creative industries opens up discussion on institutional connection or interconnectivity on a structural level. It emphasizes the institutional linkages of television stations to related industries, including global distributors, marketers or producers worldwide, and the formation of an integrated business or industries that operated on media content and format production (Waisbord, 2004). As illustrated by the Latin American

media cases, Waisbord (2004) stresses the inseparability between the local television system and the global system. In other words, television is now simultaneously global and local, or international and national, and the local media environment is constantly shaped by the pull and push of local and national cultures (Waisbord, 2004).

Moreover, as TV format trading facilitates cooperation between global media and local media amidst competition, the study of TV format's interactivity provides a perspective on how economy and culture are closely linked in the context of globalization.

### *Labour*

As reality TV gains tremendous popularity, television stations start having a dedicated team for this genre. While reality TV production emerges as an expertise, the globalization of TV formats has cultivated an international community of professionals sharing the expertise. Troy Devolld, in *Reality TV: An Insider's Guide to TV's Hottest Market* (2011), outlines the pattern of programme development, storytelling and marketing of reality TV. The book is regarded as one of the industry guides for reality TV professionals. Apart from content and promotion, the globalization of TV formats also creates a new profession that is dedicated to the international trading of TV formats. Furthermore, given the increasing interaction within the television industry across the globe, along with some predominant video sites (e.g. YouTube) that indicate the number of video views, the way information and insights are disseminated has changed and industry professionals across the globe have more interactions than before. Still, although TV formats in the United States are no longer guaranteed best sellers with the highest hits, industry professionals tend to take television in the United States as a key reference (Waisbord, 2004).

### *Intellectual property*

As many industry professionals tend to draw reference from those TV programmes proven to be successful in other markets, these programmes are exposed to the risk of being copied by other media without paying for permission. As such, producers and government are increasingly aware of the importance of intellectual property protection. Chalaby (2010) found that Britain, as the second largest exporter of TV formats, has been very proactive in creating a favourable environment with advanced intellectual property protection for content producers. In the meantime, producers and distributors have become more active in monitoring copyright violations. The legal dispute between a London-based format distribution company ECM and Shenzhen Cable (Waller, 2002) is an example: ECM sold the TV format of *Go Bingo* to Shenzhen Cable in 1998 but the Chinese company refused to pay the amount indicated in the contracts. After four years of legal disputes, a Chinese court forced the Chinese company to pay ECM \$200,000 for the licensing rights. And yet, in some cases, the line to define whether a show is a copy or not is not clear. In 2012, Telpa Distribution, the producer of *The Voice of Holland*, accused China's *The Voice of China* of copyright violation. This case appeared controversial as the Chinese version has a couple of differences from the Dutch version. White and Brenner (2004) argued that concepts of reality TV shows are quite difficult to protect. In the

context of China, for example, any phrases that contain the word “China” could not be part of the registered trademark. In other words, if *The Voice of China* seeks trademark protection, the producer can only register *The Voice*. Still, there are only a few studies dedicated to the intellectual property protection of TV formats. As such, it has become a new academic focus that requires further research.

### *The impact on local markets*

While the United States and some European countries (especially the United Kingdom) are taking the lead on TV format production, countries in Scandinavia and Asia Pacific (including Australia) are regarded as localizers. Jensen (2007) compared the use of format adaptations between the public broadcasters in Denmark and Australia. The research unveiled that Danish public broadcasters tend to adapt TV formats more frequently than Australian public broadcasters. This could be explained by how public broadcasting is seen differently in Denmark and Australia. In fact, some countries even adapt the TV format of news and documentaries in order to build an authoritative voice in global discourse and thus extend the country’s soft power overseas. For example, Russia Today, a Russian TV network founded in 2005, has adapted various formats from leading international media (e.g. CNN) in its news programmes and documentaries. Meanwhile, given the foreign influence that might be brought by an imported TV format, some countries, China for example, have limited the number of foreign TV formats. Since 2014, China’s TV stations can only have one foreign TV format per year and one music talent show per quarter (Kemp, 2013). Illustrated by the examples above, the cultural industries perspective enables us to analyse how a TV format is being adopted in a certain region and critically examine this international flow and adaptation.

### *The publics, politics and identity*

Although theories of cultural industries often focus on economy more than politics, there is a research niche area in how TV formats are closely linked to the publics, politics and identity. Beeden and de Bruin (2009) compared the original British version and the American adaption of *The Office*. The research revealed that the success of TV format adaptation significantly depends on its capacity to reflect the national culture and the articulation of national identity. Take Punathambekar’s concept of “mobile publics” (2010) for example: some reality TV shows use digital technologies as a way to engage their viewers and this becomes a platform for audiences to express their identity. For example, in a reality show featuring Indian idols in 2007, the two finalists, Amit Paul and Prashant Tamang, who came from a Northeast India cast, leveraged public support from their region. The reality TV format opens another door for the public to reflect on what is possible despite social construction and political circumstances. In fact, the image of idols carries certain weight in entertainment, and the study of idols also emerges as an area of research interest. For instance, Kjus (2009) studied how idols are produced in Norway and the research unveiled that given the participatory nature of reality TV and the use of digital technologies, reality TV actually provides a channel to recreate the society’s value chains instead of simply advocating the existing state of affairs.



## Cultural industries as an approach to TV format studies

The rendezvous between global TV formats and cultural industries opens up new arenas for exploring the nature of TV formats, apart from the localization process of these global formats that are deemed essential. The approach of cultural industry to the study of TV formats elevates the production, marketing and distribution of TV formats from a media product on a macro “industry” level on which this unique media commodity is seen as reflecting the complex relationship with the audience, identity and politics, regulation for a specific culture and society where they adapt or clone the format. The focus on the cultural industries becomes more legitimate as the entire industries have started to develop the flow and chain of production, adaptation and purchase of television format maturely, and operate the commercial trade at a global scale (Havens, 2006; Jensen, 2007). Thus, from a macro perspective, the flow and then the adoption of television formats worldwide by television stations could cast a broad picture of the entire global political economy of culture.

An academic discussion of conceptualizing the production of TV format as a domain of cultural industries also necessitates theorizing TV format as a mass-produced “transnational” commodity (Mikos and Perrotta, 2012: 84). In more recent studies of the global adaptation of Colombian telenovela *Yo Soy Betty, La Fea*, Mikos and Perrotta (2012) compares local adaptations of the Colombian telenovela in different continents, and discovered that in the case of these adaptation, genre proximity – which is a more differentiated concept of cultural proximity (Straubhaar, 2007) – gradually becomes an obsolete concept if, simply, hybrid television formats are being produced to cater to the diversified audiences in different geographic locales. The arguments based on the cultural industries would imply that so long as the format is produced and distributed in such a way that it inherently meets the needs of the global television market by hybridizing different genre conventions and media experiences of the audiences in the production and eventually it is being adapted and localized, the explanation of the popularity of a television format should be explained in terms of, not the audience needs or taste, but the industrial and internal logic of the cultural production.

Such an argument shifts the entire discussion of television formats to a framework of cultural industries studies in which the local adaptation of television formats by the television stations matters when we explain the format’s success. Take the TV format of the reality show, for example: its success is not a random coincidence but an extension and application of the industrial logic. First, there are certain formats of reality shows (e.g. competition) that are proven to be economically viable. Second, producers of these reality shows often have some successful formulas in term of content development, storytelling and marketing based on their past experiences. Third, while localizers draw reference to how popular some reality shows are, especially those from the United States and Europe, producers monitor the adaptations of their TV formats and ensure there are no violations of their own intellectual property. Last but not least, the reality TV business cultivates an international community of professionals with expertise in the production of reality shows, TV format trading and so on.

To a certain extent, the cultural industries perspective is a theoretical turn or a “turn back” to the industries, which in practice puts together the production on a routine

basis, rather than lopsidedly bestowing too much power to the audience or the genre as such. Audience and market size are advertisers' indicator for sponsoring the television programme, and the genre and the content still matter when it comes to viewership. But on the whole, the expected feedback of the audience and the previous proven popularity of the format if genre itself are just contingent factors among the multiple considerations of the television industries for adopting the television format. In the study of Danish and Australian adaptation of TV formats, Jensen (2007) considered their differences and similarities of patterns and schedules of TV formatted programme in terms of industry factor and structure. From the perspective of the industry, the television stations decided the genres, the schedule and the number of local adaptation based on market size, the notion and ideology of public service, the existing television programmes, media ecology and competition. This is also an indication that the industrial or structural aspect of the study of television formats has gradually taken place in addition to the concrete content modification and ideology of the representations in the new formats.

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