THE NEW MEDIA GEOGRAPHY OF GLOBAL AND LOCAL PRODUCTION NETWORKS

Abstract

This article highlights the networked collaborations, across non-traditional lines, between producers, broadcasters, digital content developers and telecommunications providers for the development of content across multiple platforms. Through using global production technologies such as co-production and formatting, they are able to localise program narratives with the participation of audiences, online communities, and media events — all of which increase the value of the overall program package for the international market.

Global film and television programs are based on production ecologies that interconnect vast networks of producers, broadcasters and digital content developers. These partnerships include collaborations on multi-platform media to stem the growing ‘audience coup’ emanating from file-sharing sites and to exploit social networking aspects that surround popular television programs. In particular, professional media producers take advantage of the reciprocal relationship between actual and virtual communities that coalesce around television shows in the form of real live media events, program participation, public display, online chat rooms and blogs. While these immersive environments extend a global media product’s reach into specific local contexts, they also provide the blueprint for its successful adaptation in different markets around the world.

This article explores the intersection between professional media practices and active public engagement with television programs: the dichotomy of media localisation and globalisation is at the core of the investigation. Public involvement in television programs runs the gamut of attending open auditions and participating in television programs to creating a plethora of user-generated content. These activities add value to programs because locally acquired expertise becomes part of a production matrix that is reapplied to the development of new media products. Central to the argument are the international networks of producers and their application of global production technologies which constitute the new media geography for content development and consumption.

Global production technologies such as co-production and program formatting facilitate the development of programs for local viewing pleasures and interactive engagement. Whereas co-production occurs through a variety of economic, political and cultural constellations — ranging from treaty co-production to unofficial
co-ventures—program formatting is based on the licensing of concepts and the technological transfer of expertise associated with program development. Formats of the reality TV genre in particular, highlight the extent to which value is extracted from every link in the production–distribution–consumption/interaction chain.

Moreover, the global trade in television formats and the rise of reality TV genres have contributed to a changing dynamic between program developers and audience members. Television formats have to be recognisable, so limited copyright can remain with the original owners, but also adaptable so they can be produced for local audiences in different markets around the world. Formats therefore entail pre-determined parameters for characters, sequence of events, mise-en-scène, logo, style, music and audience interactivity, which are outlined in the production manual, the so called bible. These elements form part of a program’s narrative arc into which cultural characteristics and local stories are inserted to adapt it for different viewing preferences. This adaptation is also determined by audience participation, which enhances the value of the overall program package for the international market (see Figure 1).

![Format Adaptation to Different Markets](image)

**Figure 1: Formats**

Even though formatting constitutes a growing industry — it is worth over US$8.7 billion globally — the actual production and distribution connected to this technology remain little understood. On the other hand, the products that have arisen from the format trade are widely known by audiences around the world. Programs such as Pop Idol, aka American Idol, Australian Idol or Canadian Idol, Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?, America’s Next Top Model, Big Brother and Survivor are watched by millions of viewers. Pop Idol and its franchise productions are so popular with audiences that the format has been called a ‘business changer
for all of network television’ (Carter, 2006: 194) since it exemplifies how to ‘maximize ancillary exploitation of a format in order to generate maximum revenue’ (Schmitt et al., 2005: 147).

In addition to their gravitational pull with audiences, many formats are synonymous with interactivity, with respect to both local community-based events and immersive online environments defined by the virtual exchange of information between peers and digital content developers. Format production and distribution companies like Endemol (Big Brother; Deal or No Deal) and FremantleMedia (Pop Idol; The Apprentice; Ugly Betty) launched program interactivity through phone-in votes and online content in the United Kingdom in the late 1990s, and thus set the precedent for integrated program development (Television Research Partnership, 2002). The reasons for this integration were technical (i.e. compatibility between wireless services), but also related to the accelerating competition in the broadcasting industries that resulted in international networks of producers, distributors, broadcasters, subcontracted production companies, telecommunications providers and cross-platform content developers, which today constitute the formatting business — for example, FremantleMedia collaborates on Idol with the Fox Network and Cingular (for phone-in votes) in the United States, Bell Globemedia and Telus (for mobile phone content) in Canada, as well as Network Ten and MediaSmart for commercial online video in Australia. According to Barwell from MediaSmart (cited in Horan and Szollos, 2006: 3):

Online advertising is developing rapidly and we are recognising synergies and opportunities available between television, online and other digital mediums. Young Australians are watching television programs and simultaneously interacting online and on their mobiles … we can offer measurable, truly interactive and attention-grabbing video advertising online to take advantage of this phenomenon.

Internet advertising, phone-in votes, blogs and online merchandising have become the new standard for television formats. This viral engagement is complemented by staged real-life media events that situate a format in the centre of community locales.

**Notions of community: Public spaces and immersive environments**

A key aspect in the localisation of formats is the notion of community, which situates audiences in specific locales that provide familiar reference points and the opportunity for collective experiences and memories. Communities are defined by people sharing common interests and beliefs, which in turn determine the degree of identification and adhesion to a group. Whereas media events are predominantly associated with actual locales, online environments are the result of shared interest in the inter-textual mosaic of program narratives. This mosaic, defined by its multiple entry points into program narratives — from the actual plots to inter-textual references and cross-promotions — creates a non-linear form of engagement with content. It therefore constitutes a narrative map with overlapping areas for interactive play. In combination, media events, interactivity
and related texts constitute areas for the reciprocal production of meaning. At the same time, they represent sites for the production and promotion of program content itself (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2: The mosaic of format adaptation**

With regard to format franchises, both actual and virtual communities play a pivotal role for migratory narratives, which are localised through the use of national signifiers, cultural reference points and, most importantly, ‘stories’ about program participants and their rootedness in specific locales. Local ‘stories’ are at the heart of program adaptation because they identify time and space, amplify commonalities and anchor shared experiences of a cultural group. In addition, format producers utilise public and commercial sites such as plazas, theatres, shopping malls and hotels as venues for the auditioning part of program development and promotion.

The auditioning process for what Hibberd and colleagues (2000) define as ‘semi-professional performers’ localises a program and situates it into a specific cultural setting. The process itself exemplifies the first stage in extracting voluntary labour from attendees who, lured by the possible fulfilment of the ‘American Dream’, subject themselves to a wide variety of exploitative manoeuvres from producers, including the signing of release forms that strip them of their personal and moral rights and relinquish their copyright to the show’s producers (Baltruschat, 2007). Hibberd et al. (2000) therefore suggest tighter regulatory measures from broadcasters to ensure that semi-professional performers are protected from the potentially damaging effects of their program involvement. The authors (2000: 72) also state that:
public participation is a key strategy used by programme-makers, both public service and commercial operators, to help them deliver lower production costs coupled with larger audiences ... In short, public participants constitute an important pool of talent for programme-makers.

As a result of active engagement with content, audiences are increasingly shaping program narratives. However, as stated by Murray (2000: 152), ‘there is a distinction between playing an active role within an authored environment and having authorship of the environment itself’. Program participation and interactivity thus take place within pre-established frameworks determined by producers and digital content developers, which limit the degree of audience engagement to a narrowly defined spectrum of choices. In fact, audience interactivity has been called ‘crowd sourcing’ because it is based on the exploitation of cheap labour — people who use their spare time to create content, solve problems and even conduct program-related R&D (Howe, 2006).

Media events: Global formats, local stories

The staging of media events for film or TV program promotion is not a new concept. However, the rise of reality TV and its popularity with audiences can partly be traced by examining the extent to which these events play a crucial role in localising formats such as Pop Idol. Program auditions have resulted in large turnout rates in cities across North America, Canada and Australia. Numbers reach the thousands as potential contestants line up in front of public plazas, theatres, shopping malls and hotels, where they often camp overnight to be to be first in line for the three audition rounds.

Like the US and Australian franchises, Canadian Idol’s search for semi-professional performers begins with taped auditions in cities across Canada. Producers also liaise with local radio stations and sponsors to create ‘shopping mall’ contests, which allow the winners to advance to the taped ‘celebrity’ round. In 2003 and 2006, between 9000 and 16 000 potential Canadian Idol contestants attended the open call. Contestants — who have to be between 16 and 28 (or 16 and 30 in Australia) years old — audition for a variety of reasons, including career advancement, learning about the music business, personal challenge and most importantly for a ‘fun time’ with friends and family (data are based on author’s surveys of 200 attendees, conducted on 26 April 2004 and 6 February 2006).

For formats like Idol, ‘national’ symbols and the personal background stories of contestants are essential for embedding the format into a local context. In the case of Canadian Idol, localisation occurs through inserting signifiers such as the Canadian flag and the national anthem, which is performed by some contestants during the auditions. Opening shots to the Canadian franchise feature ice-sculptures in Ottawa and the historic intersection of Main Street and Portage Avenue in Winnipeg. In addition, stories from a Canadian perspective are built in for viewers — from the young teacher from Saskatchewan who was voted most popular by her high school students to the friends from the Maritimes who are flown to Toronto,
local aspects of culture are intertwined with the narrative to provide entry points for viewer identification (B. Mulroney, Canadian Idol host, 2004, pers. comm., 29 April; M. Lysakowski, line producer, 2004, pers. comm., 29 April).

Moreover, media events situate the program into communities and heighten interest in the show’s narrative and characters. For example, in 2006 the Canadian broadcaster of Idol staged a ‘block party’ prior to the final show of the season (CTV, 2006: 2–3, 4):

The outdoor event … featured individual performances by Top 2 competitors Eva Avila and Craig Sharpe, group performances by the Top 10 and Top 4 and a question and answer period with the audience … The entertainment didn’t stop with the celebrities. The group of about 100 fans was entertained with trick bicycling, circus performers, balloon animals, free Idol swag, makeovers, and — particularly popular with some yawning parents of energy-filled Idol fans — free coffee and breakfast rolls.

The finale, which is broadcast in front of a live audience, also leads to special events such as the gathering of 5000 people at Saskatoon’s Credit Union Center in 2004. The community came together to watch the episode on two giant video screens and to celebrate its hometown contestant Theresa Sokyrka, who was the runner-up for the title of Canadian Idol:

The sight of Sokyrka on the big screens continually evoked ear-splitting screaming, clapping and cheering and some fans jumped out of their seats to get a better look at the hometown hero. At times, Credit Union Center took on a New Year’s atmosphere as fans carried balloons, blew horns, threw confetti and did the wave. (Kachkowski, 2005)

As a result of these events, the program’s narrative is embedded into local settings, thus creating emotional connections to characters. while at the same time, fostering product branding. The format’s narrative is intertwined with familiar cultural references and national sentiment to create a maximum resonance from viewers. The ‘mosaic’ of format adaptation gains even greater impetus through inter-textual references and cross-promotions in entertainment shows, local news programs, TV guides and print media. Inter-textual proliferation of formats is just one example of how media convergence affects multiple layers of production, distribution and consumption — through synergies, tie-ins, serialisation and internationalisation.

Media events, television spectacles, program narratives and their cross-references thus yield stories that are fuelled by a curiosity for novelty and the extraordinary, but also reinforce previously held beliefs, stereotypes and culturally defined preconceptions. These stories act as temporally and spatially situated cultural markers that mediate values and beliefs tied to local contexts. Many program narratives are also ‘universal’ as they address intimate relationships and family, therefore creating dramatic templates for international adaptations. The dichotomy of the global and the local is inevitably at the core of formats, since they are distributed internationally and adapted for local consumption.
Interactive formats and the creative audience

Interactive formats are shifting the boundaries between media production and audience reception. However, whereas producers, broadcasters and distributors share in the profits from interactive media, audience productivity has yet to be acknowledged as a remunerable contribution to new media developments. Meanwhile, companies like Endemol and FremantleMedia are tapping into revenue streams from mobile phone media, internet distribution and the growing video-on-demand (VOD) market. In addition, they target peer-to-peer networks, which are generating a wealth of creative output in the form of blogs, written or in video form, open source-code software and information databases like Wikipedia. Many of these online communities are based on a digital commons principle to allow access to everyone in the sharing of information, knowledge creation and social networking (Benkler, 2006). Film and television producers recognise the potential for procuring interest for their programs through these networks, evidenced in program-related blogs and cross-promotions on file-sharing sites like YouTube and MySpace.

In fact, broadcasters and producers increasingly are deploying social networking strategies, which are applied in peer-to-peer environments. Endemol, for example, is targeting internet sites such as MySpace to gain access to promotional channels on the one hand, and to source user-created content (USG) on the other hand. The company is digitising programs for online distribution and mobile TV, in addition to expanding program-related internet games and sale of merchandise. Endemol is also developing strategies for ‘participation TV’, which is based on generating revenues from interactive mechanism such as voting for contestants and other forms of participation for payment: the goal is to create programming that is fully funded by viewers (Cowley, cited in Salz, 2006).

Subsequently, business models in the new television economy are based on creating partnerships across non-traditional lines to include broadcasters, producers, digital content developers and telecommunications service providers, as well as ‘semi-professional’ producers of USG. These new partnerships are a response to a media landscape in which USG is changing the dynamics of production and reception. However, in spite of the ‘celebration of citizens’ media’, exemplified by Time magazine’s focus on USG in 2006, a closer look at the political-economic context of digital media production reveals that consolidations between conglomerates and internet companies have steadily increased over the past five years. In order to regain control over digital content distribution, News Corporation paid US$580 million for MySpace in 2005, thus gaining access to over 50 million users. During the same year, Viacom, owner of MTV and CBS, purchased NeoPets (for US$160 million) and iFilm (for US$49 million). In 2006, Google purchased YouTube for US$1.65 billion (Cloud, 2006) and NBC bought iVillage.com — frequented by 15 million online users — for $600 million. The rush to acquire internet properties is largely a response to a downturn of 35 per cent in prime-time audiences over the past decade (Stone, 2006). However, it is also the result of emerging opportunities across digital platforms — in particular, the accessibility to new audiences and interactive users.
Content: The new currency

In a keynote address to delegates of MIPCOM 2006, Beth Comstock, the president of digital media and market development at NBC Universal, emphasised the notion of ‘community’ and new forms of ‘engaging storytelling’ as a business stratagem to stem the growing ‘audience coup’ resulting from the proliferation of file-sharing sites:

Content is king, but the monarchy is being overthrown by MySpace, YouTube [and] iTunes. The consumers are in more control than ever. What does it do to our business model? We have to create content that compels and connects.

Compelling content at its core is about great storytelling. We need innovative storytelling that’s active and immersive, engaging people with a new depth of interactivity and intensity, like we’ve never seen … We have to be the absolute story-telling factory. We have to engage people minute after minute, for as long or short as possible.

As a result of its ‘360°’ approach, NBC follows broadcasters such as CBS in the United States and the BBC in the United Kingdom in developing interactive television programming, which incorporates creative efforts from audiences: ‘Consumers want to be in control of the story itself or at least they want control in the story unfolding. We have to understand [this] and tap into the power of community.’ (Comstock, 2006: n.p.) Therefore, NBC purchased iVillage because it provides access to an established online user base interested in health and fitness issues. NBC benefits from the social networking aspects of the site because they enhance the emotional engagement with programming and related branded entertainment. At the same time, the network maintains its traditional gatekeeper role by setting the parameters for the flow of content.

A key challenge for broadcasters and digital content developers is the effective indexing of vast amounts of information, which through USG is expanding exponentially across multiple digital platforms. Search functions and categories — based on ratings such as ‘best of’, ‘recommended by’, etc. — help users to identify what content is available. Digital content developers therefore use these functions to select, censor, prioritise and promote certain programs. According to Roma Khanna (2006), senior vice president of content at CHUM Television in Canada:

You need to provide choices. The most important thing after content is the context, the branding and the editorial. Why are you coming to this video? The value of the brand means out of the million things you could watch today, here are the two that you have to watch.

Ownership of file-sharing sites therefore guarantees media companies a gatekeeping role for content distribution. Within this editorial space, interactive users are able to make their own recommendations and share information with peers. File-sharing sites enable broadcasters and advertisers to track the number of downloads, recommendations, actual viewing and program-related commentaries.
At the same time, the sites also provide a source for creative talent, which is exemplified in Pepsi Cola’s campaign in China that utilised a reality TV-style contest for the promotion of its brand: consumers were invited to submit a 200-word script for a TV ad and then vote on other entries on the company’s website. According to Leo Tsoi (cited in Savage, 2006: 2, 5), Pepsi-Cola’s marketing director in Greater China:

How the consumer is involved is much more important that the end product … If you were to make a submission, if you were to vote, you have to spend quality time to think, evaluate and create; that is the real interaction with the brand — the moment of truth.

[Consumers] are now also the media, because they are the ones spreading it but, more importantly, they are also the marketer and the advertising agency. It is four or five roles in one.

This form of ‘crowd-sourcing’ has created a new dynamic between program developers and audiences as the reciprocal production of content underscores a shift in broadcasting mandates. As broadcasters and advertisers mine the creative engagement of viewers and consumers, they also embrace genres that are synonymous with branded entertainment, namely reality TV, which is predominantly based on formatted concepts.

Conclusion

In the new media geography of global and local production networks, global program concepts are adapted to new markets through: international collaborations between producers, broadcasters, telecommunication producers and digital content developers; contextualisation of global program narratives for local consumption; and audience participation and interactive engagement. More specifically, global formats are localised through licensing the franchise to a local broadcaster, who contracts a production company to work under the supervision of the format owner and licensor. Therefore, formats entail two important dimensions: they have to be ‘adaptable’ for international audiences as well as ‘recognisable’ to allow for control over the franchise by the original concept developers. Audience interactivity also follows pre-established modes through phone/text-in voting, which generates revenues for telecommunications providers and participating sponsors. Online interactivity in the form of blogs and chat rooms is rapidly becoming standardised across international markets, as are web stores for ring tones and program-related paraphernalia (i.e. wallpaper, t-shirts, hats, etc.).

Moreover, producers use media events to embed format narratives into actual community settings, therefore extending the programs’ promotional reach and popularity. Here observers, participants and interactive users receive an opportunity to enter the mosaic of a program and experience a game doc for ‘real’ and in close proximity to celebrities. These events also provide an outlet for social activity,
fun and entertainment and allow small sponsors to ‘get in on the act’, especially when local contests like ‘Toronto Idol’ or ‘Vancouver Idol’ are staged in shopping malls across the country. As a result, media events procure the desired ‘talk’ about a program and thus raise its profile for advertisers and program sponsors. Thus, even though formats closely follow their bible, they also feature local stories, locales and characters to successfully adapt them to viewing preferences. In turn, the knowledge and expertise that is derived from program adaptation in one market is added to the overall program package, which can then be sold for a higher price in additional markets.

The international format trade is subject to the changing dynamics in networked economic relations and consumer practices. Thus, in anticipation of a potential shift in audience tastes, producers have begun to focus on ‘scripted’ formats, especially soap operas or ‘telenovelas’ from Latin America (Housham, 2006). Scripted formats have always been part of the international format business, evidenced in dramatic adaptation of The Restless Years, which was produced by Grundy in Australia and licensed for the Dutch and German market as early as 1990 and 1992 (Moran, 1998: 123). Therefore, the proliferation of the global format trade, combined with an interest in soap-opera style reality TV, have made telenovelas, with their closed serial structure and intertwined narratives, a hot property amongst format producers. In fact, a special ‘Telenovelas Screening’ was held before the official start of the international television market MIPCOM in 2006. Consequently, FremantleMedia’s German production subsidiary, GrundyUFA Produktion, adapted the Columbian telenovela Betty La Fea for Sat1 and called it Veliebt in Berlin. Channel 4 in the United Kingdom and ABC in the United States also acquired the telenovela and named it Ugly Betty. ABC thus follows NBC (owner of Telemundo in Mexico), CBS and the Fox network in their pursuit for new telenovelas, which are cheap to produce with budgets typically ranging from US$100 000 to $500 000 per hour.

According to Mike Murphy (cited in Housham, 2006: 9), FremantleMedia’s president of worldwide drama, the new scripted formats will draw from plots currently found in reality TV programs: ‘Big Brother is a telenovela [and] Survivor is a telenovela — a story set over a set number of episodes.’ Similar to formats of the reality TV genres, the key for scripted formats is the ability to hybridise narratives and to adapt them to new cultural settings. In addition to a growing focus on scripted formats, producers are also entering co-production and co-venture arrangements with producers around the world. (Bazalgette, chairman of Endemol UK, cited in Carugati, 2006: 20). Through combining global production technologies, international networks of producers are thus expanding the localisation of program concepts into new production territories.

References


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