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by

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**“Not Your *Abuela*’s *Telenovela*: *Mujeres Asesinas* As a
Hybrid Latin American Fiction Format”**

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by

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Dissertation

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Dedication

To Alejandro, Diego, mom and dad, with all my love and gratitude.

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This dissertation traces the trajectory of *Mujeres Asesinas* (“Killer Women”) as a fiction series developed in Argentina for a domestic audience (2005-2008), to the Mexican television format adaptation explicitly produced for a transnational Spanish-language audience (2008-2011). A critical transculturalism theoretical framework (Kraidy, 2005), centered on hybridity, provides a multi-layered approach to the inquiry by counterposing two distinct locales with the institutions, practices, processes and relationships that link them, as well as the hybrid text that serves as the site of negotiation. As a reality-based fiction series developed and adapted by independent producers with links to powerful media players in their own countries, *Mujeres Asesinas* provides a vehicle through which to understand some of the tensions and contradictions surrounding the regional television format business from a local-to-local perspective with attention to local, national and transnational forces and constraints. The format’s

production and localization reveals a complex web of contextual and relational links that complicate current understandings of media globalization, particularly around the rise of independent media production and the transition to a multi-channel media environment. My findings underscore the role of nation states as primary sites of media, regulation and cultural policy-making. As a case study, this work contributes to the growing bodies of research on counter flows of global television formats and intraregional television flows in Latin America.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

This dissertation traces the trajectory of *Mujeres Asesinas* (“Killer Women”) as a fiction series developed in Argentina for a domestic audience (2005-2008), to the Mexican television adaptation explicitly produced for a transnational Spanish-language audience (2008-2011). A hybridity and critical transculturalism theoretical framework (Kraidy, 2005) provides a multi-layered approach to the inquiry by counterposing two distinct locales with the institutions, practices, processes and relationships that link them, as well as the hybrid text that serves as the site of negotiation. As a reality-based fiction series developed and adapted by independent producers with links to powerful media players in their own countries, *Mujeres Asesinas* provides a vehicle through which to understand some of the tensions and contradictions surrounding the regional television format business from a local-to-local perspective with attention to local, national and transnational forces and constraints. The format’s production and localization reveals a complex web of contextual and relational links that complicate current understandings of media globalization (M. Keane & Moran, 2008; Albert Moran, 2009a; Waisbord, 2004) particularly around the growth of television formats, the rise of independent media production and the transition to a multi-channel media environment. My findings underscore the role of nation states as primary sites of media, regulation and cultural policy-making (Morris, 2001) by situating production of *Mujeres Asesinas* within concrete “national-territorial” frames, and highlight the emergence of ‘interdependent producers.’”

The main objective of this dissertation was to better understand how the television format business operates on an intra-regional level in Latin America by analyzing the production of one particular text, in this case, *Mujeres Asesinas*, in two discrete national locations, and as a fiction format that traveled first in a South-South and then a South-to-North direction. This study was concerned with investigating the context surrounding the development of the series from its inception, as the television adaptation of a best-selling book, to a surprise hit on open television for a domestic audience in Argentina, to its adaptation in Mexico for a transnational audience. Because the series was as commercially successful as it was innovative and controversial in both countries, it was important to interrogate the role of independent producers involved, in reference to each other and in reference to other media players in their home countries and abroad. Finally, this study was also concerned with identifying the commercial and cultural-ideological tensions and contradictions inherent in the adaptation process and in the text, in order to better understand issues of power as they play out in two discrete nationally-embedded global media sites.

Mujeres Asesinas explores the complexities surrounding particularly gruesome murders committed by women in Argentina who were convicted for their crimes. Rather than focus on the investigation and resolution of a crime, the show highlights these women's psychological motives and personal histories; histories that include abuse, incest, prostitution, and other forms of disenfranchisement. Their commonality is the drive to commit murder as a form of 'liberation' from seemingly unbearable circumstances.

Although much of the media globalization research on Latin America focuses on *telenovelas* (López, 1995; Mato, 2005b; E. Rogers & Antola, 1986; Schement, 1984; Sinclair, 1999; Sinclair & Straubhaar, 2013; J. D. Straubhaar, 1991, 2004) the region's principal television export, we don't know too much about the production of other genres in Latin America, or about the cultural production aspects of the television format business when multiple partners from various countries are involved. The research on *telenovelas* certainly informs this work in important ways, but does not help explain why this product, which is also a melodrama, became as polemic as it was popular in both countries, for example.

The discussion will follow a thematic organization as a way to better address various aspect of the relational approach to analysis as formulated by the theoretical framework I have chosen for this study, hybridity and critical transculturalism (Kraidy, 2005).

TELEVISION FLOWS

Mexico has long held a dominant position as the leading exporter of television products in Latin America (Antola, 1984; Sinclair, 1999; Sinclair & Straubhaar, 2013). Argentina has a long tradition of television production, but its products didn't travel well beyond the Southern Cone due to a "cultural discount" (Hoskins, McFadyen, & Finn, 1998), over its distinct dialect of Spanish. However, Argentina recently became the 4th leading exporter of television formats in the world and the leading exporter of formats in Latin America (Chalaby, 2011). This phenomenon can be explained, in part, by the

incursion of foreign media interests into these countries through various forms of partnerships, agreement or joint ventures (J. Piñón, 2014). Piñón is referring to a localization trend that had Argentinian companies producing Spanish-language versions of *The Nanny*, *Married with Children*, *Who's the Boss*, *Bewitched*, and other programs for companies such as Sony Pictures International and BVI/Disney as early as 2004.

However, a review of the national context surrounding ‘the boom’ of the television format business in Argentina reveals a complex picture that has at its center an economic and institutional crisis of unprecedented proportions in 2001. Almost overnight, the country’s currency plunged, advertising spending was severely cut, and the demand for local content increased exponentially (the new exchange rate made imports prohibitive). Conversely, Argentina became a very attractive market for foreign production services based on the exchange rate. By 2005, Argentina was experiencing a record year for television production (M. Rodríguez, 2006) and companies that were actively involved with exports before the crisis now considered them essential to recouping their production costs (Barbadori, 2012).

This period also coincided with the explosion of television formats on the global market, which further accelerated the expansion of the local television format business and of independent media production companies in the country. At the risk of oversimplifying the reasons for the emergence of Argentina as the 4th leading exporter of television formats in the world, it is important to consider several other structural factors such as: the country’s high rate of media penetration (one of the highest in the region); foreign ownership patterns in local media; a growing demand for formats in the

international media market; and recent state initiatives specifically designed to support independent/national television production. Argentina now boasts the highest number of independent producers in Latin America (Gashe, 2010).

As my chapter on the adaptation of *Mujeres Asesinas* in Mexico demonstrates, the establishment of a subsidiary of Endemol in Mexico (through a partnership with Televisa) and the commercial success of global television formats such as *Big Brother*, generated interest in the production of television formats beyond *telenovelas*, and planted an awareness of the exporting potential of ‘home-grown’ adaptations. Both Televisa and TV Azteca have developed partnerships with local independent producers as a strategy to diversify their content offerings beyond *telenovelas*. At the same time, they have also invested in collaborations with other independent producers in the region, as a way to tap into newer, edgier content that appeals to a younger, digitally savvy media consumer, as they prepare for increased competition associated with the new telecommunications regulatory environment, which has recently allowed telecom companies into television. The investment strategy Televisa has employed with Producciones Pol-ka, for example, allows Televisa to retain control over production and distribution for the U.S. Spanish language market. As Piñón (2014) has noted, it is becoming increasingly important to better understand how foreign capital investments of this nature, which aren’t always evident, may impact national broadcasting. As this study shows, Televisa’s strategy has not been as successful as it relates to controlling the licensing rights for the English language market in the U.S.

HYBRID PRODUCTION

Some authors have noted that recent developments in the television industry have led to a new international division of labor that continues to benefit global capitalism at the expense of local players (T. Miller, Covil, & McMurria, 2005). Piñón's (2007) analysis of the new informal division of labor organizes the players in three tiers, where "Colombia, Venezuela, Perú and Argentina are the providers of ideas; Mexico and Venezuela are the owners of the production infrastructure; and U.S. Hispanic networks and corporate America (are) the sources of funding for production" (p. 131).

The evidence in this study mostly supports that notion, but is complicated on a few fronts. The first concern is related to infrastructure. As new relationships are being forged between traditional U.S. media players and producers in Argentina around their desire to capitalize on the growing domestic Latino audience (IberoAmerican Observatory on Television Fiction, 2008, p. 52) they also contribute to financing new infrastructure, whether directly or indirectly (as in the case of Disney, with its studio infrastructure in Buenos Aires). As this study shows, there is developing competition among independent producers in the region for U.S. business around English-language productions, and localized Spanish-language adaptations. On a separate front, Mexico, and specifically Televisa, is also investing in Latin American producers, and although the nature and the extent of those investments is not clear, there are business relationships in place that provide financial benefit.

Additionally, trade patterns related to co-production deals suggest that the bulk of U.S./Latin American co-productions are captured by Mexico (IberoAmerican

Observatory on Television Fiction, 2008). This is perhaps the latest iteration in a longstanding hemispheric pattern that privileges Mexico as an intermediary between the U.S. and Latin American television business. For example, Mexico has served as a gatekeeper for translations of all television products sold to Latin American countries since the 1970s (Bielby & Harrington, 2008, p. 132). Executives in Argentina interviewed for this study made repeat mention of pursuing U.S. co-production business with little success. While the distinctive Spanish of Argentina has hampered its ability to export canned products in the past (its offerings suffer a ‘cultural discount’ based on the distinctive Spanish accent, which does not generally sit well with U.S. Hispanic audiences) independent producers in Argentina have proven that they are capable of transcending linguistic barriers by producing localized versions with casts from destination countries, as in the case of *Amas de Casa Desesperadas* (Emanuel Respighi, 2013). In addition, the Colombian Spanish accent is also distinctive¹ and yet Colombian producers have become some of the most active in the region, with strong ties to Mexico City, Bogotá and Miami, in the effort to cater primarily, but not exclusively, to a U.S. Hispanic audience (J. Piñón, 2014). This would suggest that the reasons for this lack of access to co-productions with North America are more complex. It may have something to do with Colombia’s recent emergence as the third largest economy in Latin America after Mexico and Brazil, and Argentina’s somewhat volatile political and financial environment, which represents a higher level of risk. Argentinian producers interviewed

¹ In 2004, James McNamara, CEO of Telemundo remarked that the Colombian Spanish accent and colloquialisms would not sit well with audiences beyond Colombia (Morales, 2004).

for this study did mention greater ease developing co-production business with Europe and Africa, which seems to indicate that alternate transnational alliances or ‘partnership’ tiers are developing on a global basis. This is a point on which further research is required.

HYBRID BUSINESS PRACTICES

My conversations with industry professionals in Argentina and Mexico confirmed that business arrangements around television formats can vary significantly by venture and the organizations involved. The Mexican adaptation of *Mujeres Asesinas* I initially thought was a co-production was described to me instead as a combination of business arrangements: a “format sale” from Producciones Pol-Ka to Mediamates, and “pre-sale” and “co-financing” business collaborations between Mediamates, Televisa, Univisión, and Sony/AXN for the adaptation in Mexico. Whether these are distinctly different arrangements than co-productions remains to be seen, as a Televisa representative recently admitted that the company hesitates to call certain arrangements co-productions, to avoid devaluing the creative work of its partners abroad (Cendrowski, 2013). There are also less evident business arrangements that would be important to investigate, such as Televisa’s ‘investment’ in Producciones Pol-ka, which seems to be associated with a first-look deal (“Pol-ka, talento high-end para proyectos exigentes,” 2013). These arrangements constitute hybrid business practices that allow producers to borrow external business models and/or reconfigure certain practical financial and operational arrangements and transactions to help manage the uncertainties of the global business

trade within their own context and subject to their own organizational parameters. As Havens has pointed out, the business practices of Hollywood, and of richer Western nations, are generally favored as the preferred models (2006), but as this study shows, Latin American producers are also subject to specific national and local constraints, such as labor laws and shifts in the domestic industry, that directly impact their potential export activities.

MULTILAYERED DISTRIBUTION AND CONTENT DIVERSIFICATION

As a requirement imposed by Televisa and Univisión, who co-financed the adaptation of *Mujeres Asesinas* in Mexico, the series had to be developed and produced in accordance with a digital distribution strategy. From a short-term business perspective, the *Mujeres Asesinas* adaptation provided an immediate opportunity for Televisa to diversify its fiction format portfolio in the wake of a content agreement with Univision that restricted the online distribution of its *telenovelas*. It also coincided with the introduction of Univisión's and Televisa's digital distribution efforts. This focus on multiple windows of distribution is also tied to the roll out of terrestrial digital television (TDT) across Latin America and "triple play" bundling (television, telephony and broadband Internet) services by both television and telecom industry players (Sinclair and Straubhaar, 2013). In this way, just as cable channels provided an entrée for *telenovelas* into the U.S. market (Bielby & Harrington, 2008), the proliferation of digital distribution channels seems to be providing an opportunity for the introduction and circulation of new hybrid genres and formats developed in Latin America.

INDEPENDENT OR “INTERDEPENDENT” PRODUCERS?

This research centered mainly on the work of two independent production companies: Producciones Pol-Ka in Argentina, and Mediamates in Mexico. It is interesting to note that both companies function as production arms of the most powerful media organizations in their respective countries: Grupo Clarín (and its Canal 13) in Argentina, and Televisa in Mexico. This raises questions about whether they are independent at all (they are, at least to a small degree). In each case, independent producers provide a level of flexibility that is not generally available within the large media organizations, which operate with a number of limitations that include everything from ingrained organizational schedules and routines to ideological issues. Independent producers, such as Pedro Torres, CEO of Mediamates (now El Mall), who worked with Endemol and Televisa, bring to the television format business a specific form of social and cultural capital that endows them with a professional advantage in the local industry.² Piñon (2011) has written about the institutional-industrial-cultural role of executives and producers involved in the creative translation process of television products for various audiences. Although his work applies to Latino executives working within the U.S. television industry, where they play a facilitator role designed to bridge differences between bilingual Hispanic viewers and mainstream audiences, he points out that other authors have described similar roles as ‘gatekeeping’ (Hirsh, 1972), ‘cultural

² As will be discussed later on, in the case of Pedro Torres, he also brings to his work a degree of political clout, thanks to his previous affiliation with Televisa, and important political figures in Mexico (including the current president), based on his company’s work in political media and communication. These activities have often been symbiotic, which has attracted significant public attention and criticism.

intermediaries' (Negus, 2002; Nixon and Du Gay, 2002), and 'creative managerial' roles (Hesmondhalgh) (p. 394). In Mexico, Pedro Torres was drawing on his experience with global reality formats, experience in the advertising field, on relationships with Televisa as well as local actors, directors, public relations and other professionals, on his expertise with new media technology, etc., and with others on his team who also have specialized production experience not only in Mexico, but abroad, to navigate multilayered industrial, social and cultural tendencies inherent in the production of a format adaptation.

Beyond the ability to access talent for the production of global television formats, these powerful companies also benefit in other ways from their association with independent producers. In Argentina, a historical legacy that divided broadcasting and production creates the illusion of division between Producciones Pol-Ka, El Trece and Clarín, but in reality, their businesses are almost fully integrated (Barbadori, 2012). As this study will show, Pol-ka is a subsidiary of Artear, so its major stakeholder is Grupo Clarín. Pol-Ka functions as the production arm of El Trece, another Clarín property. Pol-ka pursues a range of production activities, and derives its income from a variety of sources beyond the work it handles for El Trece. However, many of these activities are sourced through other companies that share cross-ownership, a strategy that in very practical terms reduces local competition. This dynamic also ensures that El Trece can exert a measure of control over what it will pay for production services, which in a way, forces Pol-Ka to pursue co-productions, formats and other export activities as a way to increase its earnings. Pol-ka, Ideas del Sur and Patagonik are independent companies

legally, but all share ownership ties with Clarín, and in some cases even share personnel with other subsidiaries (Gustavo Aprea & Kirchheimer, 2012).

In Mexico, independent producers such as Mediamates (now El Mall) and Argos Communication enjoy a certain degree of autonomy, but are also dependent on their close relationships with Televisa and TV Azteca, respectively. Although Televisa and TV Azteca both have in house production studios and services, they rely on independent producers such as Mediamates/El Mall and Argos as a way to expand their repertoire of content and reduce financial risk. Argos was responsible for some of TV Azteca's earliest successes with *telenovela* production, and in the case of *Mujeres Asesinas*, Mediamates helped Televisa venture into non-*telenovela* fiction production for a multi-channel environment. It is unclear whether Televisa and TV Azteca hold any kind of financial stake in these independent production companies, but these collaborations are closely integrated and mutually beneficial. 'Independent' producers are introducing a measure of innovation, challenging the status quo, and providing new options for powerful media giants in their respective countries. However, they aren't exactly coming up with these options as a way to challenge the dominance of these powerful players (J. Piñón López, 2007); they are in fact, helping these powerful players diversify their own content and venture into new 'creative' and 'production' territory without having to take on the full risk that these activities often entail.

The independent producers I interviewed for this study seem to recognize that they depend on each other for ideas, services and business referrals just as much as they depend on powerful media players in their own countries, but they are also growing

increasingly competitive with each other at a regional level, especially as they vie for business from other international players. My research revealed an interesting dynamic along these lines. There is a tendency among producers not only to privilege their own creative work over the work of others within their own organizations, but also, somewhat surprisingly, in relation to the format originator. References to the script and format originators as sources of creative input during interviews were, for the most part, brushed off. It is difficult to determine the reasons for that based on the work included here. More work remains to be done on this front in order to determine if underlying business reasons motivate this type of behavior.

TEXTUAL HYBRIDITY: MUJERES ASESINAS AS A HYBRID TEXT

Television formats have become a convenient and profitable model for television production around the world since the 1990s, thanks to larger technological, economic and cultural forces. New telecommunications technology, deregulation and privatization increased the overall broadcast capacity around the planet (Albert Moran, 2009b) and translated into increased demand for content. In addition to (readymade) canned programming, formats, adaptations and remakes began to circulate in greater numbers, and were institutionalized under an international business franchising model (Ibid, p. 18). The sheer volume of trade in television formats has, at various points, raised concerns about their potential for homogenizing television around the world (Waisbord, 2004). However, others have pointed out that global formats are neither formulaic nor culturally

neutral (Oren & Shahaf, 2012) and that they can also function as cultural barometers for local sites of social or political struggle (Kellner, 2007; Kraidy, 2012).

Mujeres Asesinas was as popular as it was polemic in both Argentina and Mexico, so it is interesting to consider the cultural production context in each locale as it impacts the text. The series incited public discussions around representations of women and gender issues, as well as the relationship of violence to national identity -- violence in both the private and political realms, even as it ventured further and further away from the intent of the author who wrote the book that inspired the series' development, which was more focused on the psychological motives of women who are subjected to various forms of abuse and disenfranchisement in their public and private lives.

Television formats, are by the very nature of their industrial production, hybrid texts. The tensions and contradictions surrounding genre in reference to the longstanding Latin American *telenovela* tradition, to consider how cultural producers involved with *Mujeres Asesinas* in both locales engaged with, endured, resisted, appropriated or celebrated global forces. This becomes particularly interesting in reference to the way violence is depicted in discrete locations, and even across various platforms. For example, although both the Argentinian production and the Mexican adaptation are graphic in their visual representation of violence, the Mexican adaptation was criticized for its glamorized approach to the topic. What is most curious, though, is the degree to which the text stands in stark contrast to the reality of shockingly high femicide rates in both countries, which are some of the highest in the region. This contradiction was not lost on a few media critics, individuals who participated in the production, and

representatives from feminist groups who voiced their opinions in the media; however, most criticism seemed to revolve around more generalized concern with the depiction of violence on screen.

Identifying the sources of tension and contradiction inherent in the transnational production and circulation of the series speaks to the way media professionals and others associated with the series may “define for the rest of us the possibilities or impossibilities of the medium” (Kraidy, 2012). It is interesting to note that in certain ways, producers who are invested in the work of cultural translation, and who operate in sites with divergent contexts and historical conditions resonate in a similar way in terms of ideological biases that marginalize workers in the production process (Timothy Havens, 2006).

Because the primary driver behind the production of television formats is economic, producers will continue to try to identify desirable markets for their content at all costs, whether the market can be easily identified or quantified, or whether it needs to be created or harnessed, as in the commodity audience (Caldwell, 2008). The tendency is to highlight and normalize identity formations that are lucrative and consistent with hegemonic values and cultural frameworks.

As a case study, this work contributes to the growing bodies of research on counter flows of global television formats and television flows in Latin America (Mikos, 2012; Oren & Shahaf, 2012; Sinclair, 1999; Sinclair & Straubhaar, 2013; J. D. Straubhaar, 1991, 2007; Thussu, 2007). No other work that I am aware of has specifically addressed the rise of independent television production and format exports from

Argentina, so my work makes a contribution in that area, complementing work like that of Piñón on new circuits of exhibition in Latin America (J. Piñón, 2014).

BACKGROUND

The Mexican adaptation is a co-production led by Pedro Torres of the Mediamates Group (an independent advertising and entertainment production house for television and interactive platforms) in partnership with Televisa, Univisión, TVC (a Mexican cable television shopping channel), Sony/AXN regional television cable channels (Meehan, 1990). In its first season, the Mexican series broke ratings records on Televisa's premium cable TV channel, Cablevision, and reportedly reached a national audience of 5 million (Proceso, 2008). The show was later rolled out on regional cable and broadcast on open television. Three seasons were produced in all, for a total of 40 episodes of 60-minutes each. In Mexico, the series was broadcast in a biweekly 10 PM slot between 2008 and 2010, and while it performed consistently well during the first two seasons, it was cancelled due to faltering ratings in its third season, when storylines deviated from the original.

The *Mujeres Asesinas* format was developed by Pol-Ka Producciones, a television and film production company in Buenos Aires with links to Grupo Clarín³. The series is based on a local best-seller by the same title, authored by a journalist who became intrigued by some of the news coverage of local murders in *El Heraldo de Buenos Aires* (J. Young, 2008). Although only 13 episodes were initially planned, the series achieved

³ Artear owns a 30% stake in Pol-ka Producciones, and Artear is majority-owned by Graphic Arts Editorial Argentino (AGEA), and both are part of the Grupo Clarín, the largest media conglomerate in Argentina.

such immediate ratings success that four seasons (for a total of 78 episodes) of ‘Mujeres Asesinas’ were eventually produced and broadcast on *El Trece* between 2005 and 2008. The series was critically acclaimed as one of the best series ever produced in Argentina.

On the surface, the Mexican adaptation certainly looks and sounds like a *telenovela*: the show features a string of well-known and glamorous *telenovela* stars and intensely melodramatic narratives -- elements that have come to be synonymous with the Televisa brand. However, *Mujeres Asesinas* hardly fits the classic Mexican ‘rags to riches’ *telenovela* storyline, genre or business model (Grinstein, 2000). The series explores the complexities surrounding particularly gruesome murders committed by women in Argentina who were convicted for their crimes. Rather than focus on the investigation and resolution of a crime, the show highlights these women’s psychological motives and personal histories; histories that include abuse, incest, prostitution, and other forms of disenfranchisement. Their commonality is the drive to commit murder as a form of ‘liberation’ from seemingly unbearable circumstances. Inevitably, each of the one-hour episodes culminates with a murder, depicted with a level of graphic violence that is sometimes difficult to watch. Adding to the shock value is a photographic treatment that has been likened to film noir and cinema vérité, and the incongruence of watching well-known (and beloved) *telenovela* actresses, who have little or no previous screen time as villains, commit horrific acts of violence on the small screen (López, 1995).

Beyond its narrative departure from the classic *telenovela* genre, its categorization in the press, in promotional campaigns, as well as online, is further complicated by various cultural and industrial frames of reference. *Mujeres Asesinas* has been described

as reality-based crime fiction, detective fiction, mystery, psychological thriller, drama-suspense, pulp fiction, black comedy, fantasy, and, even as a *telenovela*. One *Los Angeles Times* correspondent described the Mexican adaptation as follows:

“Think of it as "Desperate Housewives" -- make that very desperate -- with butcher knives, vials of poison and bottles of hydrochloric acid. Or an extremely stressed-out "Lipstick Jungle."

It's the hit Latin American TV series *Mujeres Asesinas* (Killer Women), a high-gloss revenge fantasy about the fury of women scorned that has become a major TV hit and a minor pop-culture phenomenon in certain Spanish-speaking parts of this hemisphere.” (Venus-25, 2009)

That *Mujeres Asesinas* inspires a connection with *Desperate Housewives*, as it also does with *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*, two very popular U.S. media franchises that have enjoyed broad circulation in Latin America during recent years is hardly surprising (and perhaps somewhat intentional). This complex and often contradictory fluidity that lends itself to referencing, cross-referencing, categorization and re-categorization at multiple levels of the global format licensing process is central to understanding the shifting patterns of television forms, funding, production and flow in the international television marketplace (Johnson, 2008).

Because genre speaks to its importance as a primary field of interaction between producers and their audiences (Straubhaar, 1991), the tentative and contradictory nature of the program's association with elements of various genre traditions underscores its status as a transnational hybrid cultural product designed to appeal simultaneously to various local and transnational audiences. There is a tendency in the industry to lump all fiction programming that originates in Latin America under the *telenovela* genre, likely

as a byproduct of its global success, but this may change as new distribution alternatives, financing patterns, and market imperatives drive both established and emerging producers and exporters in Latin America to think of audiences (and genres that could succeed with them) in new ways.

The trajectory of *Mujeres Asesinas*, from its inception as a television adaptation of a local best-selling book in Argentina, to its status as a commercial and critical success in its home market, to its adaptation as a co-production for local and transnational cross-platform distribution, highlights the rapidly evolving, complex and somewhat chaotic nature of world television as it applies to one of the largest cultural-linguistic markets (Bielby & Harrington, 2008) in the world.

WHY MUJERES ASESINAS?

First, at the level of global television flows, *Mujeres Asesinas* makes an interesting comparative case study based on Mexico's status as a leading exporter of television content on the global stage relative to Argentina's historical trajectory as a medium-sized exporter (Roncagliolo, 1995) and its recent emergence as the leading exporter of formats in the region (Thussu, 2007). Although Argentina has enjoyed a long tradition of producing and exporting cultural products, it wasn't until after the economic crisis of 2001-2002, and the subsequent currency devaluation (which depreciated local currency by 70%), that local independent producers experienced an increase in demand from local networks that could not longer afford as many imports (Thussu, 2007). At the same time, they also experienced increased demand on the international market, where

Argentina's new pricing advantage provided an incentive (Newbery, 2006b). The crisis was followed by a surge in co-productions and television exports; an estimated 40,000 hours were exported in 2006 (Byrnes, 2006). The country currently has the most independent producers in Latin America (Byrnes, 2006). Argentina's entry into cross-national co-production arrangements has been a key factor for its expansion into markets that generally do not purchase content based on their own production capacity, such as Brazil and Mexico.

Second, *Mujeres Asesinas* makes an interesting case study at the level of genre and cultural proximity (Newbery, 2008b). The Mexican adaptation, which was explicitly developed for local and transnational cross-platform distribution⁴, is among the first wave of Televisa scripted series to break out of the traditional *telenovela* format.⁵ From a business perspective, the adaptation provided an immediate opportunity for Televisa to diversify its fiction format portfolio in the wake of a content agreement with Univision that restricted the online distribution of its *telenovelas*. Just as cable channels provided an entrée for *telenovelas* into the U.S. market (J. D. Straubhaar, 1991), the proliferation of digital distribution channels seems to be providing an opportunity for the introduction and circulation of new hybrid genres and formats developed in Latin America.

Third, as a hybrid text, *Mujeres Asesinas* has incorporated elements of the local, national, regional, transnational and global, and is complicated by the contradictory pull of the desire for national identification/representation/mediation and exporting strategies,

⁴ Cross-platform distribution refers to online distribution (streaming and on-demand channels) as well as mobile distribution through apps.

⁵ Televisa's breakthrough in the international non-scripted format market dates back to 2006 (Moreno, 2012).

which demand, at the very least, a modified treatment. Scholars have referred to various aspects of this dynamic as a “Pan-Latin American focus” (Lopez, 1995, p. 265), a “watering down” of cultural content (Bielby & Harrington, 2008), “a global cosmopolitan sensibility” (Nora, 2008), or as “transborder visibility” (Mayer, 2003). As a fiction ‘brand’, *Mujeres Asesinas* has generated a space for nuanced critique of social ills that have come to permeate people’s daily lives in Mexico and Argentina, not unlike certain strands of the *telenovela* genre (Ma, 2006). According to Osvaldo Di Paolo (Hernandez, 2001) the Argentine format is deeply rooted in a long tradition of popular Argentine detective fiction literature (the oldest in Latin America) that experienced a resurgence during the 1990’s, when a series of neoliberal policies and the impact of globalization plunged the country into an extreme state of political and economic turmoil. The entertainment narratives, which are drawn from journalistic reports, invite readers to engage with the moral dilemmas that afflict the characters and the societies they inhabit, without dispensing grand moral pronouncements. Di Paolo identified *Mujeres Asesinas* as the first production to translate the Argentinian tradition of detective literature to the small screen (2011b). It is important to note that this tradition was, according to some authors, derived from the North American and European traditions of detective/crime fiction that made their way to Argentina (Di Paolo, 2011b). In *Mujeres Asesinas*, the focus on unconventional themes that are at the forefront of public discourse in the social and political milieu in Argentina⁶ brought attention to forms of violence against women

⁶ The government of Cristina Fernandez has been actively involved in reforming a 200-year old civil and penal code that, in her view, is “inexorably linked to the human rights violations of the 1976-1983

that have traditionally been ignored or excluded in the public sphere, and, more broadly, explored issues of individual versus collective responsibility for violence.

Some of these themes were carefully negotiated in the Mexican co-production, and in some cases were explicitly omitted “out of respect for the Mexican public” (Di Paolo, 2011a; Ostrom, 2011) as in the case of religious themes which could be interpreted as critical of Catholicism. In other cases, ‘global’ narrative elements and product placement opportunities were introduced with the (presumed) intent to fulfill multiple functions in diverse markets. For example, a highly sophisticated crime investigations unit, along the lines of the CSI: Crime Scene Investigation franchise, specializes in crimes committed by women. It was inserted as a mechanism to provide the series with continuity from one episode to another, and “presumably, to assure anxious viewers that justice will be served” (Pérez-Raigosa, 2009). The irony was not lost on Mexican television critic Alvaro Cueva who delivered a damning critique following the program’s debut:

“*Mujeres Asesinas* can be explained as an Argentinian product, because, for many different reasons, they have a lot of women who commit murder. And, the public looks for those stories because they are shared stories. They are familiar. And, although in Mexico we also have our own female murderers, our context is different. It pains me to write this, but in our dear country, women do not kill. We kill them” (Johnson, 2008)

The inherent tensions and contradictions associated with the workings of the industry as they play out in the production and circulation of *Mujeres Asesinas* as a

dictatorship, and the paternalism of the Roman Catholic Church” (See Cuajeiro, 2011). Other series produced shortly after *Mujeres Asesinas* reflect these themes: *Montecristo* (2006), *Televisión por la Identidad* (2007), and *Vidas Robadas* (2008) all focused on people’s disappearances during the military dictatorship years (Warren, 2012).

hybrid text provide a lens through which to examine the hegemonic tendencies of capitalistic institutions in popular media against the backdrop of current social “struggles” in order to understand the shifting arena of cultural globalization. As Ana López reminds us:

“Television only works insofar as it assumes-- and therefore legitimizes--the demands and needs of spectators: but it does not legitimate these demands without redefining them according to what is acceptable within socially hegemonic discourses.” (Lopez, 1995, p. 257)

In this way, adaptations become complex fields of mediation (Cueva, 2008, translation my own) that are shaped by the interplay between commercial and cultural-ideological considerations. Unfortunately, scholarly literature on television adaptations focuses mainly on motives and expected outcomes, rather than on intercultural interactions among partners (Martín-Barbero, 1993). This dissertation makes a contribution to the field in this regard. The emphasis on hybridity (Timothy Havens, 2005) provides a unique lens on the role of culture to understanding the complexities of the industry’s organizational structure and dynamics at a regional level (Kraidy, 2005). Much remains to be written about interregional format flows in Latin America. This dissertation is an attempt to meet that need.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The following will delve into a literature review, and begin by introducing the work on television formats as a way to section contextualize the development and production of *Mujeres Asesinas* as a hybrid Latin American fiction format. Television

formats are a central feature of international television trade and have become a convenient and profitable business model for television production around the world since the 1990s, following sweeping changes in media deregulation, privatization, and the advent of new communication technologies (Bielby & Harrington, 2008, p. xiii; Timothy Havens, 2006). Television formats, defined as “complex bodies of industrial and cultural knowledge that have developed within a particular context” (Chalaby, 2011), allow companies with strong track records in their domestic market to license and sell television program concepts, scripts, production, marketing and circulation notes, and production consulting services for programs that have proven commercially successful in one or more territories. This strategic production and business model is still evolving, but is based on facilitating the circulation of ideas, while simultaneously organizing and controlling their use (Albert Moran, 2010, p. 22), whether it is for one time-use in a certain territory, or for repeat content sales across a variety of media (Albert Moran, 2010).

The global production volume of traded TV formats was estimated as a \$13.6 billion industry in 2008 (Liu and Chen, as cited in Keane et al 2007, p.76) and continues to be considered a key driver of the global entertainment business according to Format Recognition and Protection Association (FRAPA), the international industry body created in 2000 to protect and recognize television format rights⁷. The U.S. continues to lead the global television industry, capturing more than seventy percent of all television program sales around the world (M. Keane, Anthony Y.H. Fung and Albert Moran, 2007), and the

⁷ (IberoAmerican Observatory on Television Fiction, 2008)

UK leads in the area of TV format exports, controlling roughly forty percent of all format business (Meza, 2009). However, the increasing proliferation of digital delivery systems and the related need for content has encouraged an expansion in the number of content producers and buyers associated with television format trade, and has enabled alternate players to enter the field or significantly consolidate their presence on the global market (Esposito, 2008). In this way, what was once a one-way flow of media products from Western- (and primarily U.S.) based transnational media companies to the rest of the world has been destabilized by the emergence of new players, networks and multidirectional exchanges in the global mediascape (Chalaby, 2011, p. 303; Oren & Shahaf, 2012).

This new complex reality is playing out in interesting ways in Latin America, where Mexico and Brazil have occupied a ‘first tier’ of television production and exports since the 1970s, followed by second-tier countries, Argentina and Venezuela, and third-tier countries Colombia, Perú and Chile⁸ (Appadurai, 1996). Argentina, for example, recently secured a spot as the fourth leading exporter of formats in the world (Roncagliolo, 1995). And, Colombia has become a prolific exporter of both canned programs and formats, rising to occupy a spot on the second tier (Thussu, 2007). (Sinclair & Straubhaar, 2013)

Juan Piñón (2007) explained the rise of remakes during the 1990s as a byproduct of several developments that came with the wave of privatization and liberalization that swept the world, and the introduction of new regional channels, which created a need for

⁸ All other countries were considered ‘net importers.’

more content. In addition, the advent of economically accessible communication and production technologies lowered some of the barriers to entry and provided opportunities for new players to enter the field (p. 130). Another possible reason was the decline in co-productions at the regional level (except for the North American Hispanic media sector and the Mexican companies) (IberoAmerican Observatory on Television Fiction, 2008).

Although Argentina has had a long tradition of television production and exports, its “ready-to-roll” programming has traditionally not traveled well beyond the Latin American Southern Cone mostly because of its distinct accent, which made it difficult to understand for other Spanish-speakers (K. Wilkinson, 2003).⁹ However, its expansion into format development and co-productions has allowed Argentinian producers to gain entry into countries with generous ad markets in Asia and Western Europe, as well as into developing markets, such as Russia and Mexico (Newbery, 2007d).

This phenomenon can be explained, in part, by the incursion of foreign media interests into these countries through various forms of partnerships, agreement or joint ventures including co-productions. According to Hoskins, McFayden and Finn (1998) co-production arrangements--defined as partnerships between several companies based in multiple countries-- provide companies with a variety of incentives which can include (but are not limited to): pooling financial resources, access to a third country market, and exposure to new or different industry strategies. Beyond co-productions, other types of business arrangements, such as format sales, pre-sale arrangements, co-financing, and

⁹ Some of the linguistic issues that were identified as problems for the export of Argentinian *telenovelas* included use of slang, idiomatic expressions, intonation, and use of local dialects like the Italian-Creole (see "History of FRAPA," p. 167).

runaway productions have also become common (Timothy Havens, 2006; T. Miller & Leger, 2001). More recently, business arrangements continue to evolve around licensing rights and distribution (T. Miller et al., 2005).

Some authors have noted that these types of developments have led to a new international division of labor that continues to benefit global capitalism at the expense of local players. This is perhaps a different way of understanding an overarching dynamic that others have pointed out in the past. Maziotti's work on co-productions (Maziotti, 1994) in Argentina, demonstrated that these arrangements have traditionally been subject to parameters set by more powerful partners such as Italy's Silvio Berlusconi Productions and Mexico's Televisa, which translated into export and distribution limitations imposed on Argentinian producers, so the opportunities have often come at a cost ¹⁰ More recently, Piñón identified what he sees as a new informal division of labor, which is loosely based on a three-tiered system, with Colombia, Venezuela, Perú and Argentina sharing one tier as the providers of ideas; Mexico and Venezuela sharing another as the owners of the production infrastructure; and U.S. Hispanic networks and corporate America sharing a third tier as sources of funding for production (2007, p. 131).

The evidence since then mostly supports that notion, but has been complicated by a myriad of interconnected and sometimes overlapping business relationships that aren't always clear within a highly competitive private industry environment. New relationships

¹⁰ Berlusconi was among the first to invest in Argentinian co-productions as early as 1989, as a strategy to meet the demand for content across multiple television channels in Italy. The foreign partner's financial investment (estimated as 3 to 6 million Dollars per *telenovela*) was generally tied to limiting the Argentinian partner's distribution rights to Latin America and the U.S, which meant Berlusconi's company held the distribution rights for the rest of the world (Maziotti, 1996).

are being forged between traditional US media players and producers in Latin America around their desire to capitalize on the growing domestic Latino audience (IberoAmerican Observatory on Television Fiction, 2008, p. 52). Companies such as Walt-Disney/ABC, News Corporation and General Electric NBC were all developing *telenovelas* and series with partners in Latin America in 2007 and 2008 (Obitel 2009, p.311). These relationships have taken a variety of forms, from co-productions, adaptations, and first-look deals to outsourcing exercises where entire casts are transferred to the production location in an effort to control costs (J. Miller, 2010).

Yet others see this unfolding as more of an asymmetrical interdependence dynamic, which may be unequal but implies a much more complex and multilayered exchange (J. D. Straubhaar, 1991, 2007). This newfound visibility and popularity of Argentinian formats on the global stage suggest that an opening of sorts has been generated.

Piñón (2014) suggests that these new routes of innovation (Argentina, Colombia, and in a lesser way, Venezuela, Chile and Brazil) “seem to be tied to particular industrial environments in which independent producers and competition among television networks have flourished. This trend has been accompanied with coproduction agreements that allow the owners of original ideas a stake in programs while accessing foreign markets with proximate cultural proclivities.”

Recent Argentinian formats have been described as ‘edgier’ and more sophisticated as compared to regional exports from Brazil and Mexico, and carry higher appeal with a younger, more affluent and digitally-“plugged in” demographic (Newbery,

2007c). This trend is a result of a confluence of factors, both internal and external, which include:

- Changes in the global financial markets that had significant repercussions for the local TV industry;
- Clashes between the government and associations of regional producers over regulatory issues which impacted local programming schedules (IberoAmerican Observatory on Television Fiction, 2009);
- A recent legal tug-of-war between local media and the Fernández de Kirchner government over an antitrust law designed to break Grupo Clarín's media monopoly (Raszewski, 2013; Watts, 2013);
- The outcome of a deliberate national effort to incentivize and promote local television development and production (Sinclair, 1999).

More broadly, several recent developments have contributed to significantly alter the regional televisual scene for Latin American media players:

- A rising interest in independent content on the international market, especially from alternative sources other than the seven major US studios and the traditional *telenovela* makers in Latin America (Biscomb, 2011);
- New sources of competition in the U.S. from Telemundo and non-traditional players who are increasingly focused on the growth and purchasing power of the Hispanic market in that nation (J. Piñón, Manrique, L. y Cornejo, T., 2012) ;(2012)
- Technological changes associated with distribution, such as the proliferation of

regional cable networks and the transition to digital television in the United States, Spain (two of Televisa's major importers of content), and Brazil (its major competitor in the region);¹¹

- The television industry's slowly evolving transition into a "post-network era" (Lotz, 2007; G. a. J. T. Turner, 2009), which promotes cross-platform distribution environments as desirable and efficient ways to generate lucrative branding and product placement opportunities (Castañeda, 2008), and accrue intellectual property rents (M. Keane & Moran, 2008).

Organizations such as Televisa, who have all but dominated the U.S. Hispanic television programming market for so long, understand that they are now increasingly in direct competition with media powerhouses to their North (FRAPA, 2009: 13–14, cited by Chalaby, 2011) as well as with producers in East and Southeast Asia and Europe, who have begun to export their own *telenovela*-style dramas (Martínez, 2010). Co-productions provide one strategy for local and regional producers to maintain their presence in the market without forfeiting profits entirely, and for others to insert themselves into 'new' markets in a strategic way. Globalization," explains Waisbord (2004) "has intensified the interconnectivity among television industries worldwide" (p. 359) which have become increasingly integrated and governed by similar practices and goals.

For example, as U.S. networks are actively looking abroad, and focusing on Anglo-linguistic territories for new content ideas (Biltereyst, 2000), they are also

¹¹ The transition to digital television in Mexico is working itself out in the political arena at the time of this writing.

beginning to import and adapt programming that might help them maintain or improve their market share and develop product differentiation in the quest to reach a larger audience, including the growing U.S. Latino market (Dávila, 2001). The major networks have recently become interested in Latin American formats and format production services as a byproduct of co-production partnerships: Walt Disney-ABC, News Corporation and General Electric/NBC have all had successful co-production efforts related to soap operas and fiction series in Latin America within the past decade (Pinon, 2009). Buenvista International, the international distributor of the ABC hit *Desperate Housewives*, sold the script to Pol-Ka Producciones in Argentina for localized adaptations in 2006 (J. Miller, 2010). Two years later, a Spanish-language remake, *Amas de Casa Desesperadas*, developed in Argentina for the U.S. Hispanic audience, aired during a leading primetime slot on Univision, thanks to what was described as the first strategic co-production agreement between Disney-ABC International Television Latin America and Pol-Ka-Producciones in Argentina (Castañeda, 2011; Fox, 1997; La Pastina, 2005; Marques de Melo, 1988; Maziotti, 1996; McAnany & Wilkinson, 1984; 1999; Sinclair, Jacka, & Cunningham, 1996; J. D. Straubhaar, 1991; Waisbord, 2004).

Reviewing television flows, therefore, is becoming a complex, multidirectional affair. Studies of television flows and contra-flows have been predominantly analyzed from macro-level political economy perspectives that set up dichotomies of global vs. local, core/periphery, global North vs. South, West vs. the rest. What has, so far, been addressed in the literature on Latin American television flow focuses largely on the *telenovela* genre. (Albert Moran, 1998; 2008; 2009; 2010).

Much of the literature on format adaptations in international television focuses on global flows and other world regions (2012). Of special relevance to this dissertation is Oren and Shahaf's work on global television formats on counter-flows (Oren & Shahaf, 2012). (2012)The growing visibility of local producers within industries in the margin (such as those of Israel and Colombia, for example) who are gaining success on the global market with innovative ideas (via format licensing), points to the importance of understanding these locally-embedded yet globally integrated textual systems as historically-rich sites and systems of formal influence and exchange. Analyzing these sorts of dynamics at a local level, and with a slightly different lens, builds on what we already know about the activities of large corporate transnational actors in various world regions, and questions previous assumptions about the range, power and impact of their activities (Waisbord, 2004). Much remains to be written about interregional media flows in Latin America, and on other genres that originate in Latin America.

The political, economic and technological contexts within which contemporary media organizations operate are increasingly global and interconnected, and the breadth, depth and speed of exchanges between them have complicated previous understandings of the dynamics associated with cultural production and media flows. For example, the work of authors who have traced the flow of the Colombian format *Betty La Fea*, a *telenovela*/dramedy that has traveled to more than 70 countries since 2000, both as a canned/dubbed product and as local adaptations, complicates previous notions of U.S. cultural imperialism (Biltreyst, 2010). *Betty La Fea's* South to North, North to South, South to South, and North to North trajectories exemplify the growing complexity of the

global networks of culture and capital (Bielby & Harrington, 2008; Brannon Donoghue, 2011; Lippert, 2008; Mato, 2005b; Mikos, 2012; J. Miller, 2010; J. Piñón, 2011; Torre, 2012).

Recent analyses that have focused on inherent mediated cross-cultural interactions have centered on industrial practices of regionalization, localization, indigenization, glocalization and transculturation (Chalaby, 2002; J. a. E. M. Chan, 1996a; J. M. Chan & Ma, 2002; Kraidy, 2005; Robertson, 1995; Sinclair et al., 1996; Wilken, 2011). These studies arise out of a preoccupation with understanding how globalization plays out within various production scenarios of world television. However, as García Canclini (1990) reminds us, these sorts of interactions pre-date media and have been a key feature of popular culture in Latin America for centuries, and hinge on reciprocal borrowing. Others, such as Bhaba (1990) have looked at hybridity within the context of language and literature, considering it a complex and unpredictable manifestation of the mixing of cultures not without its power differentials. Certainly, culturally-hybrid production, as in the practice of “borrowing” (or appropriating), buying and adapting key elements of foreign media for local production, has been a feature of Latin American media since the 1920s and 1930s (Fejes, cited in J. D. Straubhaar, 2007, p. 37). The historical evolution of the *telenovela* genre itself since the 1950s proves that these practices predate the onslaught of U.S. television exports that generated the intellectual concern about cultural homogenization (J. D. Straubhaar, 2012).¹²

¹² As has been well documented, the *telenovela* genre has its origins in pre-revolutionary Cuba, under the sponsorship of Colgate-Palmolive, and drew heavily from other traditional forms of popular media (Maziotti, 1994, p. 312). The dynamic exchanges of scripts and talent at the regional level eventually

The contemporary flow of formats includes a similar, but much more complex transfer or exchange of specialized cultural and industrial technologies and talent. Many of these exchanges begin within the context of international media syndication markets and conventions (Bielby & Harrington, 2008), and are formalized through sales contracts and other types of business agreements, or informally established through personal connections and professional references. Industry practices associated with format development and production are still evolving, and, from what we know, continue to be shaped by contextually-specific forces. However, the growing visibility of local producers within industries in the margin who are gaining success on the global market with innovative ideas (via format licensing), points to the importance of understanding these locally-embedded yet globally integrated textual systems as historically-rich sites and systems of formal influence and exchange (Oren & Shahaf, 2012) *in reference to each other*.

Is this sort of expertise, as Keane et al (2007) have suggested, the privileged domain of Western media hubs who continue to capitalize on the economic power of global formats in the face of competition from newcomers?¹³ Or, does the counter flow of successful formats and hybrid genres from alternate locales such as Israel and Argentina, and the growth of a (more widely dispersed?) cosmopolitan industry elite (Oren & Shahaf, 2012), suggest that interlocking relationships between content creation, changing distribution patterns, and multiplying delivery technologies also contain the potential to

contributed to the evolution of the *telenovela* genre in its recognizable form as a distinctly Latin American export.

¹³ Along these lines, Torre wondered if Hollywood is ‘reallocating a portion of its development, production and promotion of its resources overseas’ by virtue of these new co-production partnerships (Sinclair, 1999).

shift the balance(s) of power in unprecedented ways? While it is important not to romanticize their potential, it is equally necessary to provide more nuanced empirical case studies on alternate players and practices in relation to each other and in relation to the global industry in order to remain attentive to the broader implications. Analyzing these sorts of dynamics at a local level, and from a slightly different perspective, builds on what we already know about the activities of large corporate transnational actors in various world regions, and questions previous assumptions about the range, power and impact of their activities (Waisbord, 2004).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This dissertation is grounded in hybridity and critical transculturalism (1972). Hybridity is defined as the “cultural logic of globalization.” By this, Kraidy means “the intermingling of people and media from different cultures as a *communication-based phenomenon*.” As a conceptual framework, hybridity and Kraidy’s specific idea of critical transculturalism endeavor to understand the complex and active links between hybridity and power in intercultural relations by “moving beyond common models of domination and resistance” that are so pervasive in media and globalization studies today (p.149). Hybridity is formulated as an alternative to political economy approaches that overemphasize structural causality and an inevitable cultural homogenization, and cultural globalization approaches that questionably celebrate heterogeneity and diversity, this framework seeks to blend both approaches by foregrounding history and context, and consider multiple and integrated levels of structure and agency. The value of the theory

of hybridity, and a critical transculturalism lens, is that it favors a *relational* approach to analysis.

An analysis of industrial practice through the narrative in *Mujeres Asesinas* is, in part, what calls for a relational approach that will allow us to understand the transnational inner workings of interdependent production practice. For this study, I will be using a more broadly conceived notion of hybridity that refers to multiple layers or realms. To be clear, I am not referring to hybrid business practices only in a corporate sense, but in a much more culturally- nuanced way. It becomes important, then, to analyze these dynamics with each of the various realms or layers of hybridity, in order to identify who the players or participants are within each layer, and to locate any points of tension, contradiction or opportunity. I will, at various points, be drawing from the critical media and industry and production studies literature (Caldwell, 2008; Timothy Havens, Lotz, & Tinic, 2009; Holt & Perren, 2009; Mayer, Banks, & Caldwell, 2009) to help explicate various aspects of hybridity in this comparative case study. I will be referring to hybridity in the following realms (or layers):

Hybrid business practices. This layer of hybridity is primarily concerned with the business culture of the television format business, including the individuals, organizations and relationships involved, as well as the various points of contact between them. It is important to point out that these relationships can exist within an organization, for example, or between organizations at a local level, for example, or between individuals, organizations or institutions at a transnational level. For example, in order for Argentinian producers to successfully export their formats to the U.S. Hispanic market,

they may be persuaded to sign “first-look” deals with Televisa or TV Azteca, for example, or risk a lack of access to that market. Or, Mexican producers may suddenly feel the need to hire consultants who can advise them on structuring a windowing deal required by potential partners who can provide financing that is essential to their show’s viability. Or, producers may need to develop their content around potential sponsorships and product placement practices in order to hedge their risks against fluctuations in the advertising industry, global markets and foreign currency exchange rates. Producers are increasingly forced to adapt and take on business practices that are either formally or informally ‘enforced’ by external/foreign entities, who, are inserting themselves into the local production realm in increasing measure.

Production Hybridity. This layer of hybridity focuses primarily on the interaction between commercial industry realities, the creative process, and the product during the reworking process. In *Mujeres Asesinas*, it allows us to observe the tasks, technologies, strategies and workers involved in the making of the media texts, including those in related industries, such as public relations and social media, who contribute to the overall production’s commercial success.

Textual Hybridity. The concern with textual and genre hybridity I will use differs from the literary approaches adapted for film scholarship. On one level, it is focused on an industry studies approach that considers “the forces – both distant and immediate—that work upon it to produce its genesis, development, specifications, narrative structures and trajectories, audience formations, etc.” (Holt & Perren, 2009). As Mayer has suggested, production practices are ‘self-defining activities’ that simultaneously construct identities

while reproducing various forms of economic, cultural and symbolic capital in societies” (2011, p. 21). In the case of *Mujeres Asesinas*, it provides an invitation to think about the discourses of violence and patriarchy and what they might reveal about broader social and political struggles in Argentina and Mexico as they are reproduced in the moment of cultural translation. On another level, this level of textual hybridity considers the inner workings of this interdependent production practice. To what extent, and under what circumstances, do the production practices serve to enact, confirm, legitimate, reproduce or challenge power relations? What kind of boundaries (based on gender, sexuality, class, or educational status, for example) restrict, marginalize or reject others within the field of production? (Mayer, 2011).

Genre Hybridity. The social construction of genre is a fluid system of categorization and understandings that is modified as it is produced and as it is received. So, it is dynamic – made visible, invisible, and routinely contested during the process of meaning making (Bielby & Harrington, 2008, p. 69). For example, the adaptation of *Mujeres Asesinas* follows in the footsteps of another successful Latin American hybrid format, that of *Ugly Betty*, the U.S. English-language adaptation of *Betty La Fea*, a Colombian hit that first aired on RCN in 1999. The *telenovela* was “de-telenovelized” in favor of pre-existing genres and modes of storytelling—and became a “dramedy” which would, potentially, carry more appeal with mainstream audiences in the U.S. who are unfamiliar with *telenovelas* (Bielby & Harrington, 2008).

Cultural hybridity. This layer of hybridity refers to several things, but primarily to the broader culture itself, so, it refers to processes that reference the audience within the

moment of production. For example, in this specific case, to the process of localization of *Mujeres Asesinas*, but in a broader sense it can also refer to regionalization, indigenization, glocalization, and transculturation (Chalaby 2002; Chan & Ma 1996, 2002; Kraidy 1999, 2002, 2005; Sinclair, Jacka & Cunningham 1996; Weber 2003). These processes are in many ways fundamental to the television format industry because viewers, by large, prefer cultural products that most closely reflect their own language, history, religion, ethnicity, and culture (which can include traditions, humor, clothing, climate, gestures, etc.) (J. Straubhaar, M. Fuentes, C. Giraud and C. Campbell, 2002). Cultural products that do not fit these ideals (generally foreign products or products that have to be dubbed or subtitled) suffer a certain kind of “cultural discount” – which means they become less desirable in trade or economic terms (Mirus, 1988). Cultural proximity is also correlated to audiences’ preference for certain genres of television programming. Straubhaar extends theory of cultural proximity to include multiple proximities (2007), to account for the reality that local audiences are not simply determined by their participation or membership in a national culture; rather, their identities are far more complex and may shift depending on their socio-demographic make-up, membership in various types of communities, imagined (Anderson, 1983) or otherwise.

(Bielby & Harrington, 2008, p. 69) Many of these dynamics understand hybridity as a “*discursive formation*,” following Foucault’s definition of a system of dispersion where “one can define a regularity (an order, correlations, positions and functionings, transformations) between objects, types of statements, concepts or thematic choices” (p.38, cited in Kraidy, 2005). This outlook is also what motivates the use of

“transculturalism” (rather than “internationalism,” “transnationalism” or “imperialism”) as a vision of culture as synthetic, which brings us to the first of three foundations for critical transculturalism:

First, the conceptualization of culture as *synthetic*: The conception of culture operationalized as synthetic questions essentialist views of culture (such as those that conflate nation and culture), and is closely related to Rogers’ (2006) view of culture as “conjunctural, relational, or dialogic; as constituted by, not merely engaged in, appropriative relations; and as an ongoing process of absorption and transformation rather than static configurations of practices.” This approach is particularly helpful to analyzing appropriation strategies of a text such as *Mujeres Asesinas*, which is a hybrid text to begin with, based on its adaptation from a best-selling book. Media professionals and marketers who are adept at recognizing cultural traces, queues or influences in hybrid media products that have the potential to resonate with certain audiences, capitalize on that knowledge or experience to then generate additional opportunities to connect media products with their ‘imagined’ audience(s) (Anderson, 1983).

Second, the emphasis is on translocal and intercontextual links. By shifting the scope of analysis away from a global-local perspective and toward local-to-local contexts, processes and relationships in relation to each other, Kraidy is, in a sense, highlighting supra-national forms of hybridity (Christophers, 2006) without discounting the power of the nation or power *within* the nation. For example, it provides a way to consider the construction of identities such as a Pan-Latino identity. The “decentering” analytical aspect of this theory is particularly useful for the analysis of television formats

based on its ability to provide a more nuanced view of media flows, relationships and practices; in this case inter-regional interactions and exchanges, with attention to global forces and local specificities. This approach is helpful to contemplate how cultural-linguistic media boundaries and identities are being configured and reconfigured within the context of rapidly evolving commercial media systems.

Third, a commitment to epistemology with multiple methodologies: discursive, textual and empirical. Kraidy refers to this approach as a “contrapuntal approach¹⁴.” By this, he means a multi-pronged approach that is based on identifying links or patterns between institutions, texts and experiences in the constitution of hybridity. In his (2005) reception study of young Meronites in Lebanon, the significance of two predominant and competing discourses, in this case those of the “West” and those of the “Arabs,” is highlighted in reference to how they co-exist and are referenced in relation to each other within a particular historically-, geographically- and culturally-specific context. This commitment speaks to the idea that there are multiple fields of power to consider in specific instances and contexts of cultural interaction, which may shift over time, or momentarily, in reference to other variables. This is helpful to gathering insight into patterns of discontinuity or overlap between culture and social structure.

At its core, critical transculturalism seeks to integrate both agency and structure in international communication analysis, with attention to “the active links between production, text and reception in the moment of cultural reproduction” (p.150). When I

¹⁴ Kraidy borrows Said’s (Torre, 2012, p. 191) contrapuntal reading approach, which is a music metaphor based on recognizing that in any given piece, although various themes may play off of one another, at times even eclipsing one another, they nevertheless work together (so there is an underlying order and multiple relationships to consider).

use the word ‘agency’ in this dissertation, I am referring in the broadest sense to “people’s ability to accomplish things in the world they inhabit” (Kraidy, 2005), but also to the communicative acts (or “articulations”) used by workers (whether they are producers or contract workers who are all but invisible) in the industry to define themselves and others in relation to the heterogeneous sector of labor they participate in. (Mayer, 2011, p. 21)

Television does not simply produce or reproduce mass culture, but rather “TV production communities themselves are cultural expressions and entities involving all of the symbolic processes and collective practices that other cultures use: to gain and reinforce identity, to forge consensus and order, to perpetuate themselves and their interests and to interpret the media as audience members” (Caldwell, 2008, p. 2).

Social practice, then, constitutes the site of agency. “Practice” in this context refers to “how a structure is actively *reproduced*” (Hall, 1985, p.103, quoted in Kraidy, 2005, p.151). Structures can be social, political or economic. Again, drawing on Stuart Hall,¹⁵ Kraidy describes a “lopsided articulation of power,” because there are multiple interactions of material, structural and discursive forces focused on social practice that are continuously negotiated in interactions of differential power. For example, what kind of negotiation power do Argentinian independent producers have to set the terms of their business relationships relative to foreign partners such as Televisa?. Or, how much creative input do directors have relative to producers whose job it is to ensure that

¹⁵ Articulation is “a way of understanding how ideological elements come, under certain conditions, to cohere together as a discourse, and a way of asking how they do or do not become articulated at specific conjunctures to certain political subjects” (Hall, cited in Kraidy, 2005, p.156).

product placement strategies meet the business requirements of global advertisers?. The charge, then, is to analyze how structures and discourses operate in a variety of contexts. Hybrid texts, then, “reflect at once the presence of hegemony and its limitations” (Kraidy, 2005, p. 156).

To better stress powers of domination and address current social conflicts and struggles -- a critique leveled against Kraidy by Douglas Kellner (2007) based on his operationalization of critical transculturalism in empirical examples-- I will draw on Rogers’ (related) reconceptualization of transculturation (R. A. Rogers, 2006). Under this definition, culture is understood as a relational phenomenon that is constituted by acts of appropriation, not as “an entity or essence that merely participates in appropriation” (R. A. Rogers, 2006, p. 475), which is in keeping with Kraidy’s view of culture as both dialogical and dialectal. Two important points are especially useful to this research: 1) the idea that hybrid forms never develop from *pure* cultural forms (p. 245) and 2) the importance of considering the multiple, shifting and overlapping nature of boundaries (p. 491). For example, within the context of hybrid cultural production, analyses that consider power struggles between local actors (who themselves are embedded in larger external networks) will find that the local can simultaneously be a site of empowerment and marginalization. As Rogers points out, endogenous and exogenous circuits of power pervade the local (p. 155). This perspective is helpful to analyzing the relationships between local independent producers in Argentina and Mexico in reference to powerful regional players such as Grupo Clarín and Televisa in their respective home countries, and in reference to local government and regulatory systems, for example. And, will also

be useful to analyzing internal struggles within local organizations.

This approach also builds on Joseph Straubhaar's theory of asymmetrical interdependence, which views the relationships between global, transnational, regional, supranational, national and local actors as interdependent, but with varying degrees of power in relation to each other (J. D. Straubhaar, 1991). As Straubhaar has pointed out, "emerging global media powers are usually even more powerful in a specific regional or cultural linguistic market that is culturally approximate or geographically proximate, or both." (J. D. Straubhaar, 2010, p. 258)

Rogers' conceptualization is also a call to consider the distinct perspectives that various participants will bring to the appropriation processes, products and evaluations thereof (R. A. Rogers, 2006, p. 500), adding an important layer of analysis: the role of "social agents" (Kraidy's term) in relation to sites of struggle (gender, social class, race, etc.) Rogers points out that understanding how a multitude of relationships and intersections are involved in any instance of appropriation or commodification is central to analyzing their role in perpetuating power relations. Who are the individuals most closely involved with the development, production and circulation of *Mujeres Asesinas*, and what kind of cultural, social, economic, capital do they bring to the work they are involved in? Who is included or excluded from decision-making during the development and adaptation processes? What kind of social, cultural, industry, policy and/or organizational constraints or incentives are they subject to (or sensitive to) within their 'field of production? (Bourdieu, 1993). An aspect that is particularly relevant to this dissertation is to work out when, how and under what conditions activities such as

writing, editing, producing, scheduling, and marketing become creative or innovative, to gain a “greater sense of when and how the routines, habits and codes are broken or maintained; by who and in what ways and with what consequences” (Negus, 2002, p. 511).

Although the television industry is now global in scope, it is primarily a domestic industry born out of local concerns (Timothy Havens, 2006, p. 11). The transformation that local and regional industries are undergoing has been described as increasingly complex, multilayered and transnational. Piñón;s (2014) work on the Latin American context demonstrates that a small number of corporations based in the region continue to dominate the industry, but that there are also growing signs of increased opportunity for new networks, independent producers and the penetration of foreign media corporations (p. 230). He describes a new hemispheric division of labor whereby new “routes of innovation” have been established through the work of independent producers, mainly in Colombia and Argentina, who are setting new precedents with their global television formats. Certain patterns of alliances are being established as in a “networked cities production system.” Miami¹⁶, Bogotá and Mexico City make up one of these systems, which have at their epicenter an overarching interest in meeting the needs of the most lucrative Spanish language audience: that of the U.S. Hispanic market, as they also seek to appeal to local and regional audiences. Although Piñón does not identify alternate patterns regionally that might include Argentina, it is interesting to consider the

¹⁶ The significance of Miami as a node for transnational *telenovela* production has been covered by Mato, (2005a) and others as it applies to a Pan-Latino market/identify more broadly (Yúdice, 2003)..

implications as they apply to this study.

Additionally, Piñón describes a new complexity in the industry that is important to note as it impacts the way we study media and production:

“The increasingly interdependent relationship among capital, copyrights, ideas, and professionals is producing a hybrid industrial schema where the foreign not only collaborates with but is also already part of the national” (p.230).

This is particularly relevant to my research on *Mujeres Asesinas*, and the role of independent producers, who display financial, operational and business practices that confirm this reality.

If culture represents the meanings, ways of action and ways to evaluate the value of actions in a society, and if cultural hybridity entails a change in those meanings and actions, then attention ought to be paid to hybridity’s ability or inability to empower social groups to have influence over the course of their lives.” (2005, p. 151). Clearly, television trade patterns are changing in new and complex ways, and new players are making inroads in an industry that has been largely dominated by U.S. and European entities. Understanding how these processes of “cultural translation” unfold within commercial media systems is important not only for the field of media studies, but as a prism through which to understand shifts in social relations within and across cultures. The commercial success of *Mujeres Asesinas* as a co-production speaks to broader changes in the international mediascape (Appadurai, 1990). Television format adaptations and co-productions are an increasingly influential practice in television, and developing a better understanding of the implications of these economic and cultural

practices from a comparative and transnational perspective is not only useful, but also timely.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

As the previous section has illustrated, television adaptations become complex fields of mediation that are shaped by the interplay of commercial and cultural-ideological considerations. The central theme of my research is the relationship between hybridity and agency within the context of globalization, and specifically how it is playing out on a regional level within the arena of transnational Spanish language television production.

This dissertation is guided by the following research questions:

- How did the original *Mujeres Asesinas* come to be a commercial success in Argentina, and how did that lead to its status as an exportable television format and the Mexican adaptation?
- What were the motivations behind the Mexican adaptation of *Mujeres Asesinas*? How were the production strategies and routines adapted in order to appeal to local and transnational audiences?
- To what extent was the adaptation driven by the involvement of independent producers and what role(s) did play in reference to each other and in reference to Televisa and Grupo Clarín?
- What commercial and cultural-ideological tensions and contradictions arise during the series' production trajectory from Argentina to Mexico, and what might they reveal about

the power (and/or limitations) of global commercial media interests as they play out in this regional case study?

The complex regional dynamics of a communication phenomenon that is firmly grounded in a commercial logic will have something to tell us about the boundaries of power, agency and identity, and how they are being configured and reconfigured in the era of global media convergence.

METHODOLOGY

According to Marwan Kraidy, “empirical research inevitably must begin with a local context, but if we are to build a truly global subfield of global communication studies, then a doubly comparative research approach is needed, working comparatively between and within various locales, on the backdrop of global processes that are often mediated by national institutions” (Kraidy, 2008, p. 351). Such an approach would anchor manifestations of power in concrete contexts, cultural codes, and social relations with a ‘translocal’ lens. In keeping with the ‘contrapuntal’ approach advocated by Kraidy, I have integrated the following methodology in my research:

Archival research: I use archival research to provide a highly contextualized analysis of the social relations and the mechanisms that regulate production, distribution and consumption of hybrid media such as *Mujeres Asesinas* in Argentina and Mexico, drawing on corporate literature and promotional materials, government documents related to state cultural policies and statistical records, trade journals and the popular press. This research was significantly strengthened by data collected in the Ibero-American

Television Fiction Observatory (OBITEL) studies 2008-2012, and by in-depth interviews.

In-depth interviews: I conducted in-depth interviews with industry professionals and television scholars in Argentina and Mexico who are in a strong position to comment on various aspects of the development, production and circulation of the television series. I developed a draft list of potential interviewees that included writers, directors, corporate executives, distributors, newspaper journalists, media critics, trade industry representatives and other industry insiders, as well as television scholars, all of whom might provide insight into the development, production and circulation of *Mujeres Asesinas*. I adopted a snowball sampling method (Lindlof, 1995) where I asked each subject for a list of others whom I might be able to interview. For all of the interviews I used Skype, a popular Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) technology, as a research tool to conduct video (or voice only) interviews as cost and geographic distance made it impossible to conduct in-person interviews. This provided an opportunity for voice-only recording capabilities with the assistance of a Skype Voice Recorder for Mac plugin, which carries some advantages over in-person interviews (Bertrand, 2010) once any ethical and technical issues are addressed and resolved. According to the authors: “recorded audio and video data could be studied exactly with the same material. The recorded interview is a mirror of what it was in reality. Non-verbal data are visible and don’t depend on the interviewer’s spare notes nor his memories (p.73).”

I shared information with my interviewees in advance via email about my research project and the required consent forms via email, requesting their permission to

record the interviews and providing the option to be identified by name, pseudonym, job title or job function. The main drawback to this method is that it required that interviewees have access to a computer, the Internet and Skype for video interviews (and know how to use Skype), or to a telephone for voice-only interviews. Even though there seems to be very little formal evidence to support the notion that telephone interviews are inferior for gathering rich qualitative data (Novick, 2008), my preference would have been to seek in-person interviews first, followed by video or phone interviews via Skype, in that order. I also used email and social media to communicate with participants as a follow-up method, to ask additional questions or verify my understanding of certain points.

Critical discourse analysis: I used critical discourse analysis to examine the creative and business logics surrounding *Mujeres Asesinas* and how they are implicated in social relations of power that support particular ideological constructs” (Ganguly, 2012). I began by analyzing industry discourse associated with promoting the Argentinian property at international media markets, which, as Havens has pointed out, are “wholly imaginative and discursive constructs” (Timothy Havens, 2006). I also looked at the media blitz that preceded each of the seasons of *Mujeres Asesinas* in Mexico, which included advertising on Televisa properties and in other local and national press, print publications, and online.

General field research: I drew from informal personal observations made during attendance at the National Association of Television Programming Executives (NATPE) trade show in Miami in 2011, where I met representatives from Pol-Ka Producciones,

attended various sessions and panels on television formats, and gathered promotional materials and industry publications.

SCOPE ARGUMENT

This dissertation is building on global media studies literature, so some terms may differ in the way they might be used in film studies. When I use the word “hybridity” I am referring mostly to cultural hybridity as an essential mechanism of cultural globalization (Kraidy, 2005). I may reference genre hybridity from time to time, but will alert the reader about which way I am using the term. I am also not using “hybridity” in the way it applies to the cultural identity of audiences.

RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

The limitations of this dissertation include:

- A general lack of access to corporate or financial information about co-productions in the context of privately-owned media, so reliable details on co-production licensing terms, for example, are not readily available;

- Limited access to a broad range of individuals within my organizations of interest.

Although my methodology was designed to get at the information from a variety of angles and resources, I found that my location restricted the level of access to individuals who weren't available via email or active on social media, mostly through LinkedIn.com and Twitter.com. As a result, most of my subjects were executives, consultants and other media professionals. Although in a few cases my requests for interviews were ignored, I was surprised to find how accessible and helpful most subjects were, and how willing

they were to volunteer information, with three exceptions: financial and legal information, and contact information for colleagues in the industry.

- This study does not adequately cover reception, which is a rich area of inquiry that merits attention in connection with the problems I have addressed, and specifically in connection with *Mujeres Asesinas* and its intended audiences.

CHAPTER OUTLINES

My dissertation is organized around an introduction, two content chapters and a conclusion. Chapter One introduces the project, provides background information and a rationale for the study, which is followed by a review of relevant literature. It also establishes the theoretical framework for the dissertation, defining the central research questions and research methodology. The objective for this chapter is to explain where my topic fits within the ongoing scholarly conversation, how my research will contribute to the field and how I plan to answer my research questions.

Chapter Two explores the development of *Mujeres Asesinas* as a surprise hit television series in Argentina, its trajectory from local hit to an exportable format on the global television market. I begin by reviewing the historical political economic context in that country as a backdrop from which to understand the contemporary television industry and the environment surrounding the activities of Producciones Pol-ka/Artear, El Trece and Grupo Clarín prior to the passing of a comprehensive media reform law in 2009. This chapter briefly explicates the state-market dynamics from the time of the country's transition from state-controlled media in the 1970's to the privately-owned and

largely deregulated structure that was introduced in 1989, to an open and competitive environment (Sinclair, 1999) that has now shifted to an era of intense antagonism between media conglomerates and the government of Cristina Kirchner. This chapter also delves into recent changes in policy, foreign investment and technology in relation to the economic crises of 2001 and 2008, which have also fostered local independent television production (Gustavo Aprea & Kirchheimer, 2009; Becerra & Mastrini, 2010; Mastrini & Becerra, 2002). As this chapter suggests, local media have been constrained by a range of factors that include internal economic, political, regulatory and labor disputes and external economic factors such as the global economic crisis of 2001, just as they have also been enabled by state intervention through various bailout plans (Becerra & Mastrini, 2010), and by internal telecommunication policy and financing designed to support and stimulate independent fiction production (OBITEL, 2012).

I argue that the success of the Argentinian series was brought about by a confluence of factors, including:

- Strategic institutional relationships focused on horizontal and vertical integration;
- A decline in advertising expenditure, which prompted programming changes;
- Programming disruptions due to confrontations between the national government and regional TV producers which provided an opening for new visual fare in the late-night time slot; and
- A general trend in domestic fiction centered on exploring social and

political themes, which may be symptomatic of other social and political changes in the broader national milieu.

Finally, the chapter reviews the transition of *Mujeres Asesinas* from domestic hit to exportable format, with consideration of marketing and promotion of the series at international media markets such as MIPCOM, in Cannes.

Chapter Three explores the *Mujeres Asesinas* co-production in Mexico and is guided by the following research questions:

- What provided the impetus for a co-production over a localized adaptation?
- What is the nature of the relationships between co-production partners and what were the creative, legal and financial arrangements?
- To what extent did concerns about genre, multi-platform distribution, and the intended global audience drive the co-production?

Before delving into the specifics of the adaptation, this chapter reviews the history of Mexican television, the complex relationship between media and the State, and the role of domestic and global forces in the local televisual industry. This is followed by a brief introduction to the current television market structure and dynamics, legislation, content regulation and standards to situate the production and circulation of *Mujeres Asesinas* in relation (mainly) to Televisa. The review identifies some of the structural factors that led to Televisa's virtual monopoly in that country, its position as the second largest media conglomerate in Latin America, and its status as the leading exporter of Spanish-language television on the global stage. I discuss the company's historical

relationship to the U.S. Spanish-language market which dates back to the 1960's and its renewed ownership stake in Univisión as a result of a deal in 2010 that included an extended and expanded licensing agreement for exclusive rights to Televisa content in the U.S. I also look at Televisa's explicit efforts to maximize the value of its content and expertise by seeking new markets, new formats, and new business models.

I then shift into an introduction to Pedro Torres and his company, Mediamates, to illustrate how this entrepreneur's unique career trajectory and relationships led him to take on the adaptation of *Mujeres Asesinas* as the company's first fiction production. Before discussing the production in detail, I provide a brief introduction to the television format business in Mexico, and discuss some of its key characteristics and trends. I then delve into the production of the television adaptation, analyzing the somewhat unique and complex production, promotion and distribution strategies associated with the series, and how the culture of production shapes the text.

Chapter Four presents my research findings, and considers the implications of this analysis for advancing a more nuanced understanding of the transnational dynamics of Spanish-language television in the era of media convergence. The findings are expected to directly engage with the broad and ongoing debates about television formats, and the cultural production studies. I will also identify potential areas for future research related to my topic.

Chapter 2: Mujeres Asesinas: The Emergence of a Television Format in Argentina

INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on the development of *Mujeres Asesinas* as a hit television series in Argentina and its transformation into global format. An introduction to the history of the audiovisual context in Argentina provides a useful starting point from which to understand the State-market dynamics that are at play today following the passing of a comprehensive media reform law in 2009. Next, I delve into an overview of the current industry context and the environment surrounding the activities of Grupo Clarín, as the most powerful media conglomerate in the nation as well as some of the other organizations that are directly relevant to the production and circulation of *Mujeres Asesinas*. That is followed by a survey of the evolution of the independent television production industry, and some of the evolving business models, practices and relationships that have helped propel Argentina into its current status the 4th leading exporter of television formats in the world. Finally, a case study of *Mujeres Asesinas* will trace its development from best-selling book to the hit domestic television series, to its adaptation in Mexico, as well as its status as the first Argentinian format to be remade in Hollywood for an English-language audience.

HISTORY OF TELEVISION IN ARGENTINA

In order to understand the context surrounding the relatively recent explosion of independent television production in Argentina, it is helpful to briefly review the history of the industry's evolution in that country. This activity supports the notion of a "globalized" media before market globalization was in full swing during the 1990's. Argentina has experienced, at various points during its history, infusions of international flows of capital, people, technology and ideas, and tests the idea of a diminished role of the State (and the power of local media policy) relative to the force of globally configured media systems and dynamics. (Waisbord, 2013).

According to Nora Maziotti (2002), the emergence of television in Argentina is linked to two key years: 1951, when the State channel, Channel 7, was first launched, and 1957, when the first legislation was introduced to regulate the development of private television. As early as 1954, a group of business impresarios, encouraged by the government of president Juan Domingo Perón, established three private business channels with the support of three U.S. networks, ABC, CBS and NBC (Ibid). The legislation set a cap on the number of licenses per owner and placed limits on foreign ownership, which in some ways limited local production, because the companies had, until then, relied on foreign financing and technical know-how (2012). The years between 1951 and 1960 constitute what Maziotti dubs a 'State-run phase' and are identified as the first of five stages in the history of television in Argentina (2002).

The second phase (1960-1973) marks the consolidation of the industry and is described as a time of impressive growth and expansion. Each of the channels located in

Buenos Aires (9, 13, 11 and 7) partnered with local production companies (Telecenter, Proartel, Telerama and the State production entity, respectively) in the capital city and with affiliates across the country. The three private channels once again partnered with U.S. investors (2012, p. 20). This helped establish a highly competitive private system of open television, financed with advertising and largely concentrated in Buenos Aires. Because government regulation prohibited the formation of networks, the legal distinction made between the private channels and production companies was somewhat irrelevant to their day-to-day operations which were largely integrated, and influenced by foreign investors (Graziano, 1974: 190 in Repoll, 2010). It was also during this time (1972) that the government created a state regulatory agency, the Comité Federal de Radiodifusión (COMFER) as the agency in charge of granting public licenses and enforcing the law as it applied to the radio and television industries. By 1969, 97 fiction series (both daily and weekly) were produced locally; any exports were limited to other countries in the region (Maziotti, 2002, p.34). The years leading up to 1974 are considered, in some ways, ‘the golden years’ of Argentine television. Local fiction production successfully occupied local schedules, garnered high ratings, captured global advertising revenue, and relegated imported programming to a peripheral status (Maziotti, 2002).

A third phase (1974-1983), is associated with the nationalization of the industry. This process began during the dictatorship of General Alejandro Lanusse, continued under the government of Juan Domingo Perón and was consolidated under the government of María Estela Martínez de Perón. With the support of various unions,

including the Sindicato Argentino de Televisión, the Asociación Argentina de Actores and the Sindicato de Prensa, the State revoked operating licenses and expropriated properties in 1974, in the interest of promoting a government agenda (Mastrini, 2006). What was presented as a cultural/social/economic project (‘television as a good for public interest’) became a powerful censorship tool to control political opposition once the military regime took power in 1976. The final blow to what was left in the way of local production was delivered in 1980, when *telenovelas* were censored on “moral” grounds (p.39). The motivation behind that decision was much more complex, as local fare was slowly replaced with imported regional *telenovela* fare (Maziotti, 1996). It is interesting to note that the first pay television operations (Cablevision and VCC) were established in 1981, when announcements were also made (and then retracted) regarding the possibility of media re-privatization (Buenos Aires report, p.23), suggesting that there may have been a connection. Maziotti (2002) argues that although the genre had always been considered vapid and innocuous by journalists and the elite, domestic *telenovelas* represented a threat to the military regime. By instituting censorship around the genre, the regime, in effect, delivered a blow to the domestic television industry, which not only relied on *telenovela* production as a generator of jobs, but also provided a site of audience identification (and national identification based on “questionable” values) based on their mass appeal and circulation (p.41). Less apparent was an economic motivation behind the decision, which centered on a cost-savings argument—the government had taken control of many television stations and production houses and operated them in a state of financial disrepair. Importing foreign content proved to be less costly than producing

telenovelas, so the government saw this practice as a potential solution to the financial issue. This also explains the appearance of *telenovela* products from other countries in the region.

The fourth phase (1984-1994) marks a period of media re-privatization that begins with the return to a constitutional government. This movement began during freely elected president Raúl Alfonsín's term and continued with the government of Carlos Menem. Substantial legislation changes were introduced, making this 10-year period the one of most growth and expansion in Argentine history in the area of media and information/communication technology. Neoliberalism policies, including measures designed to attract foreign investment and the auctioning of television licenses, placed television channels back in the hands of private citizens and infused the industry with foreign capital and new technology. In addition, the elimination of restrictions on the formation of networks and on cross-media ownership expanded ownership by groups that were already active in the print media realm, a move that proved controversial.

It was during this time that independent television production took off. Three local production companies (Pol-Ka, Cuatro Cabezas and Ideas del Sur) became dedicated suppliers of content to the private channels under an arrangement that transferred some of the economic risk to the small operators. Slowly, these companies strengthened their production, and Argentina began to insert its *telenovela* products in regional and global markets (2012, p. 24). As they became more successful, others in the industry took note and additional production companies were born.

A fifth phase (1995-2002) is characterized primarily by a series of mergers and acquisitions related to foreign investment in satellite television, cable television and telephony. Argentina became firmly entrenched in the global economy once legislation allowing foreign ownership in telecommunications passed in 1994. The environment of aperture and trade liberalization benefitted Argentinian television owners, who vertically integrated cable with broadcasting (Sinclair, 1999, p. 86). Clarín, for example, sold portions of its cable holding, Multicanal, to a local investment group backed by Citicorp on the heels of a new trade agreement with the U.S., and to Telefónica of Spain. Channel 11 (Telefé) purchased two satellite radio networks and a cable division, which it later sold to Multicanal, and which became the biggest of Argentina's cable operators¹⁷.

This injection of foreign capital also had a significant impact on independent television production. Argentina's production companies captured the highest advertising expenditure in the Latin American region (Sinclair, 1999). As the industry expanded, some of the largest media companies, such as Grupo Clarín, began to invest in production companies, altering their "independent" status (in this case Clarín acquired a minority stake in Pol-Ka in 1998). At an organizational level, most of these production houses saw their budgets, production schedules and routines altered. Canned television products were firmly entrenched in the global market, but were now beginning to erode in popularity due mainly to the Argentinian accent (Di Gugliemo, 2014). Within the span of a few years, Grupo Clarín would further consolidate its dominance over mass media, and

¹⁷ It is interesting to note that open television relied on advertising expenditures, and cable operators relied almost exclusively on a subscription fee model (this would later change).

Telefónica would gain control over the telecommunications sector. Other groups were also relevant to a lesser degree (Repoll, 2010).

If Argentina was heralded as a successful economy during the decade of the 1990's, this situation would quickly change in 2001 once the economy reached a breaking point and president Fernando de la Rúa announced that the government could no longer meet its foreign debt payments. A deep economic, social and political crisis of unprecedented proportions unfolded as the country suffered a currency devaluation of 70%, hyperinflation of up to 200%, dramatic cuts on government spending, rising unemployment, and violent protests by citizens that culminated in the resignation of the president and his economic minister, Domingo Cavallo. This marks the beginning of a sixth phase, from 2002-2006, that is characterized by a few highly volatile years of active economic recovery.

A seventh phase in Argentinian media history begins in 2007. It is marked by a period of relative stability and expansion once the country's foreign debt was restructured. A new exchange rate favored exports, and independent content production companies actively pursued opportunities to market their products and services on the global market. This phase is also considered a third phase in independent television production history. As the local cost of production began to increase, Argentina found its Latin American partners in Mexico and Colombia shifting their attention elsewhere. However, this also coincided with a global surge in the demand for television formats, which was an ideal option for the local industry (the Argentinian accent would no longer come into play, as scripts would be adapted for local markets elsewhere). Exports such as

La Lola (Dori Media Group), *Los Roldán* (Ideas del Sur) and *Mujeres Asesinas* (Producciones Pol-Ka) fit this category. The work of Argentinian authors and scriptwriters began to sell on the international market, not only for recent work, but from older catalogs of work (Di Gugliemo, 2014).

More recently, the country has experienced political polarization and confrontation between the government and major media groups. This animosity began during the first presidency of Nestor Kirchner (2003-2007) and marked the beginning of what became a strained relationship between Grupo Clarín and the government, and has escalated during the government of his wife, Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner, who assumed control in 2007 and was re-elected in 2011. Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner's government policies set out to reverse many of the political, economic and cultural consequences associated with the neoliberalism policies of the previous 30 years, namely: the concentration of wealth and power, capital flight, privatization, unemployment, poverty and social exclusion¹⁸.

Two key events in 2009 marked the beginning of a transitional phase that is characterized by political and media polarization surrounding changes in media and telecommunications policy. The first was the formal adoption of the Japanese ISDB-T TV digital standard for the country's transition to digital terrestrial television (DTT).

¹⁸ The clash between the government and Grupo Clarín was exacerbated by Clarín's news coverage of a four-month protest by farmers against tax increases leveled by the government in 2008. However, the animosity has also been attributed to a dispute over telecommunication licenses, and to a failed business offer Nestor Kirchner made to the Clarin Group during his presidency in 2007. Kirchsbaum is quoted as saying "Nestor offered the oil business from Venezuela to the Clarín group in 2007. His goal was to draw Clarín towards his policies. But when he realized that we were not interested, the war began" (Watts, 2013). A broader issue is the political left's concern about Clarín's support for every dictatorship in Argentina since 1955.

While the country is still dominated by analog media, the transition is underway (with 15 digital channels were in operation in 2012) and should be complete by the analog media switch off deadline of 2019 (2012). Argentina will have the biggest digital terrestrial TV system in Latin America (Newbery, 2012b)

The second key event in 2009 was the introduction of anti-trust media legislation, which was pushed through Congress after lengthy public debate (Raszewski, 2013). The *Ley de Servicios de Comunicación Audiovisual* (LSCA), also known as the “Audiovisual Media Law,” was designed to limit the number of cable TV and broadcast licenses one company can hold and places limits on media ownership. The new law established a distribution of ownership that is 33% private ownership, 33% for social non-commercial, non-government licenses and 33% for the State. The law also established parameters for the regulation of content. Its intent is to support local and national film and television production, as well as a more inclusive, environmentally sustainable and humane cultural policy (Repoll, 2010).

This move was accompanied by the creation of a new State regulatory entity to uphold and enforce the new law. The *Autoridad Federal de Servicios de Comunicación Audiovisual* (AFSCA), replaced the *Comité Federal de Radiodifusión* (COMFER), the entity in charge of such matters since 1972. Scholars have pointed out that the law has a few important flaws. The authority to grant licenses for large urban areas (of over 500,000 inhabitants) continues to rest with the government, so while licenses for other cities are granted by AFSCA, the president holds the decision making power over licensing in Buenos Aires where the big media groups are based. The law is also vague as

it applies to digitization and media convergence. It is also important to note that media in Argentina do not have a self-regulating system or entity (Martín Becerra, 2012).

Because the law will have a particularly powerful impact on Grupo Clarín, the organization felt that it was being unfairly targeted and challenged it as ‘unconstitutional.’ (Watts, 2013). *Diario El Clarín* and *La Nación* accused the government of orchestrating an advertising boycott against publications that do not cover its activities favorably (T. Turner, 2013)¹⁹ and the press supported two anti-government public demonstrations within the span of one year (Watts, 2013). Many other confrontations have been documented (Repoll, 2010).

The law was declared constitutional on October 19, 2013, and Grupo Clarín advanced a proposal to divest its holdings into 6 different companies (Raszewski, 2013). At the time of this writing, Clarín holds 158 licenses and controls 47 percent of the market share in the country; to comply with the law, the company will have to reduce the number of licenses to a maximum of 24 and limit its market share to 35 percent (Raszewski, 2013).

CURRENT CONTEXT

Argentina has one of the highest rates of media penetration in Latin America. According to the Sistema Nacional de Consumos Culturales (SNCC) 9.5 out of 10 households in the country have a television set (Calcagno, 2009, p. 27). Approximately

¹⁹ According to a report issued by IAPA, nearly 50 percent of state advertising was given to media groups close to the government in 2011, and other forms of economic pressure have been used against opposition media ("Argentina: Freedom of the Press 2012," 2012).

47 percent of Argentinians watch an estimated 3 to 5 hours of television per day; 12 percent watch 6 hours or more per day, and 40 percent watch less than 2 hours per day (Ibid, p. 28).

The Argentinian media market is one of the most diversified in the Latin American region, with more than 150 daily newspapers, hundreds of commercial radio stations and dozens of open television stations. Buenos Aires alone boasts 5 national open television stations, 550 radio channels and access to 12 from around the country (2013).

Open television includes one public television channel, TV Canal 7, as well as several private channels. Three private channels are based in Buenos Aires, and one is based in the city of La Plata, all of which are distributed on a national basis. These are:

- Canal 9, the one channel with majority foreign ownership, with Mexico's Albavisión group controlling an 80 percent stake;
- Canal 11 (Telefé), owned by Telefónica of Argentina, who in turn is owned by the Spanish company of the same name;
- Canal 13, owned by Artear, S.A. (a Grupo Clarín holding), and;
- Canal 2 (America 2).("Competition Problems in the Distribution of Television Programs in Argentina," 2007, p. 9).

Telefé and Canal 13 are the leading channels in terms of viewership, and capture approximately 63% of the market share ("Competition Problems in the Distribution of Television Programs in Argentina," 2007, p. 10). Telefé is the only channel to have an international signal of its own. The public channel, Canal 7, has the highest reach (99.5

percent of the country), but its audience ratings are limited (in contrast with the private channels) outside of large urban areas (Gustavo Aprea & Kirchheimer, 2012).

In the realm of pay television, 83 percent of households have some form of pay TV, and watch over 4 hours of television per day ("TV paga en argentina 2013," p. 4). Argentina has the highest rate of penetration in the region, due, in part, to regulations that set up a highly centralized broadcasting system that limited the availability of terrestrial television delivery seamlessly across the nation,²⁰ and to centralized content production (in Buenos Aires) that does not adequately address or represent the needs and interests of Argentinians in other areas of the country (Martín Becerra, 2012). Service providers include Cablevisión (which is integrated with Teledigital), Multicanal, Supercanal, Telecentro and Red Intercable. This last provider represents a network of approximately 450 local independent operators ("Competition Problems in the Distribution of Television Programs in Argentina," 2007). The two largest companies, Cablevisión and Multicanal, serve about 57% of users nationally (Ibid). Ninety nine percent of subscribers watch on television receivers, 54 percent use online streaming via a computer, 1 percent use online streaming on a tablet, and 23 percent use a streaming service on a mobile phone ("TV paga en argentina 2013," p. 9).

²⁰ National channels are brought to other areas of the country via relay stations, or through the sale of distribution rights by the channels in Buenos Aires. The LAMAC, an entity that represents 49 Pay TV channels across the region, reported a growing trend of audience migration from open television channels to Pay TV channels, as measured by a 31 percent drop in open TV ratings and an increase of 32 percent in pay TV ("Argentina. 2013 a record year for Pay TV: Audience grew 12% and has 50% of the TV audience," 2013).

The three biggest Internet service providers are Cablevisión, Arnet and Speedy. The first is majority-owned by Grupo Clarin and the others are owned by traditional telephone companies who also offer cell phone service through the Personal and Movistar brands (2013, p. 23). Argentina has only one Satellite operator, DirecTV. All of these operators offer basic and premium subscription services that include additional channels, movies, sports events and special events by way of a pay-per-view service.

As we have already established, Argentina's media and communication history provides multiple examples of the tension that exists between powerful media groups and the government, as each side advances their own efforts to increase their control over media. What also continues to be a constant are relatively concentrated patterns of media ownership. The industry has become progressively vertically integrated, with local media groups (such as Grupo Clarín) and international media groups (such as Eyeworks, Endemol, BBC, Dori Media Group) holding partial ownership stakes in production houses. In some cases these partnerships are based on financial necessity and in other cases they are based on global commercial expansion goals. It is also common to see integration between marketing companies and television channels or cable operators.

The industry is also horizontally integrated, with large media groups owning open and pay TV channels across the country, as well as a broader array of media properties that provide synergistic business opportunities. One government estimate calculated that six media organizations controlled 50 percent of all communication-related businesses in the country in 2009, which represents 117 out of a total of 239 cultural production businesses (Calcagno, 2009, p. 20). Of those, 92 percent were controlled by the private

sector, and 8 percent were controlled by the State (Ibid). Within the domestic market in Argentina, a small group of open television channels hold a strong measure of control over independent production companies in the domestic market based on their status as primary buyers of their content.

The next section will provide a brief introduction to Grupo Clarín, the most powerful media group in the nation, and also a regional powerhouse with global reach.

GRUPO CLARÍN

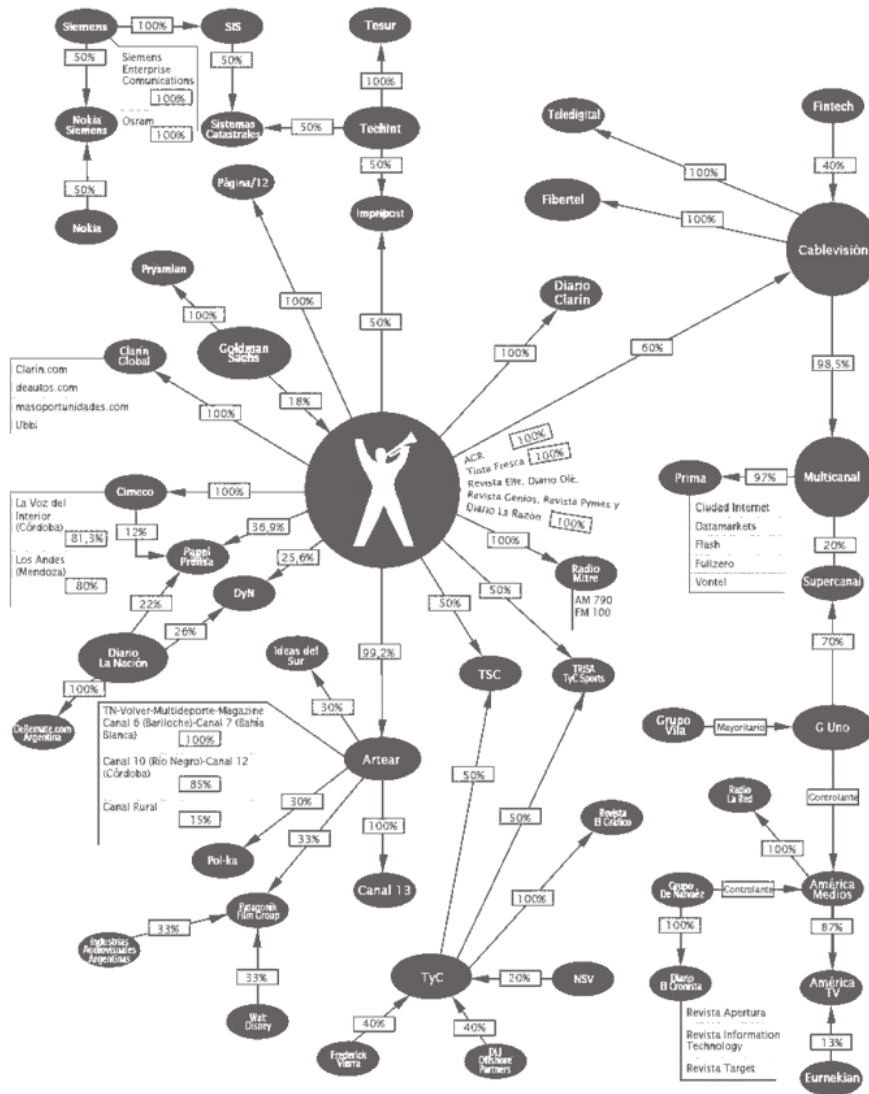
Grupo Clarín is Argentina's largest and most influential media conglomerate. The organization traces its origins back to 1945, when Roberto Noble first founded *Diario Clarín*, the first national daily newspaper in Argentina. The Buenos Aires-based company has all but dominated Argentina's media landscape since then. Today, Grupo Clarín's stocks are traded in the London and Argentinian stock markets. Its holdings include the country's top-selling daily newspaper, *El Clarín*, six other newspapers, a news agency, several digital and traditional print publishing units, a paper company, five broadcast television channels, one cable television/internet operator, ten radio stations, and several film and television production houses Figure 1 provides a visual snapshot of Grupo Clarín's holdings in 2008 (Telemática, 2008), toward the end of the period analyzed in this chapter.

Today, the group controls 60% of the cable market and 25% of the internet market, and its media holdings reach more than a million homes and businesses (T. Turner, 2013; Watts, 2013). Clarín's earnings from cable TV and Internet operators represent its most profitable and fastest growing business segment. In 2012, earnings

from these holdings registered a 22.6% increase over the previous year. Eighty-nine percent of Clarín's earnings are derived from a 60% ownership stake in one company: Cablevision, its cable and internet provider business (2013; Watts, 2013) which was added to its portfolio in 2007 (Clarín, 2008). Cablevisión has the largest number of subscribers in Argentina (7.3 million households) in a highly competitive market served by approximately 700 cable providers (2013).

Through Artear, a production, marketing and distribution company, Grupo Clarín holds the license to broadcast one of Argentina's two largest broadcast television channels, Channel 13 (El Trece), and also controls four provincial channels in Córdoba, Bahía Blanca, Bariloche and Río Negro. The group's audiovisual production interests include a 55 percent equity interest in Pol-ka Producciones (a content production firm that specializes in fiction production), and similar equity interests in two other content production companies: Ideas del Sur, which specializes in entertainment programming, and Patagonik Film Group, a film production enterprise. Although Pol-ka, Ideas del Sur and Patagonik are independent production companies, they function as subsidiaries of Grupo Clarín and provide its broadcasting properties with a steady stream of local content. They all remain legally distinct organizations but their operations and interests are highly integrated. As an example, Adrián Suar, who has served as the Creative Director for Pol-Ka Producciones has also held the post of Programming Manager for *Artear/El Trece* since 2001 (Gustavo Aprea & Kirchheimer, 2012, p. 92).

Radiografía del Grupo Clarín



Basado en el Mapa de Alianzas de las Comunicaciones, elaborado por Convergencia Telemática, junto a fuentes propias.

Figure 1. Grupo Clarín's Holdings in 2008

(Gustavo Aprea & Kirchheimer, 2012, p. 92)

POL-KA PRODUCCIONES

Pol-ka Producciones, often referred to as Pol-Ka, is one of the largest audiovisual production houses in Argentina. The company was established by Adrian Suar and Fernando Blanco in 1994, when they launched a joint project-- a pilot for *Poliladrón* -- described in corporate materials as the first television series in the country to feature a ‘new cinematographic aesthetics’ (Producciones). With 6 studios in Buenos Aires, and 350 employees, Pol-ka is considered the most prolific fiction producer in Argentina ("Pol-Ka Producciones: Compañía,"). The company’s catalog includes over 5000 hours of original programming that spans comedy action, drama and romance, some of which also feature animation and special effects.

Grupo Clarín acquired a 30% stake in the company in 1998, which makes Pol-Ka a subsidiary of Arte Radiotelevisivo Argentina, S.A. (Artear). Clarín acquired another 25% stake in 2008, following the company’s success on the international market with productions like *Padre Coraje*, *Sos mi Vida* and *Mujeres Asesinas*, co-productions like *Mujeres Asesinas*, and several films (Emanuel Respighi, 2008). Artear’s investment in Pol-Ka was designed to gain control over programming. For Pol-Ka, the investment provided a great source of capital, a secure sales vehicle, and a way to offset financial risk (2012, p. 27).²¹ This makes Grupo Clarín the majority stakeholder in Pol-ka (Amoroso, 2010). The reported acquisition, worth \$2.5 Million USD, also included a 55% stake in one of Polka’s properties, SB Producciones SA, a post-production company

²¹ El Trece’s main competitor, Telefè has a similar arrangement with Telefè Contenidos.

focused on institutional audiovisual projects (Ibid). The remaining shares, or 45%, are held between Suar and Blanco, who continue to lead the organization.

Adrián Suar is one of the best-known figures in Argentine television. He holds the title of producer and creative content director for Producciones Pol-ka and is also the programming manager for El Trece television channel. Suar is also an actor, who appears frequently in a range of television productions and advertising campaigns, and is the face of the Lays brand in his home country. Suar was born in Queens, New York, and moved to Argentina with his family when he was 2 years old. His career in television began at age 13, when he was selected to play a part on a weekly show, “El papa de los domingos.” Suar is credited with injecting new energy into the *telenovela* by moving away from the traditional format/clichés (“costumbrismo”) (Newbery, 2001). *Forbes Argentina* ranked him among the richest famous celebrities in Argentina, and listed his 2013 earnings as USD \$7,800,000 (“Ranking: Los 15 famosos más ricos de la Argentina,” 2013).

Fernando Blanco is the co-founder of Pol-ka Producciones, and is the President and Head of Production of the company. In addition to his work with Pol-ka, Blanco launched SB Producciones, a film production company. He also served as the president of the Argentine Chamber of Independent Television Producers (CAPIT), from 2003 to 2009, and as vicepresident of the Cámara de Productores de Cine (FAPCA), the film production professional association.

INDEPENDENT TELEVISION PRODUCTION IN ARGENTINA

Argentina has a long history of television exports focused mainly on *telenovelas* and children's programming (Antola, 1984; Maziotti, 1994; E. Rogers & Antola, 1986). However, independent television production was, until fairly recently, the domain of a small group of content producers closely associated with the leading television channels, advertising agencies, and, in a few cases, 'idea' shops that lacked production infrastructure of their own. A few private broadcasters, such as El Trece and Telefé generally took the lead, either by producing their own content in house, or through output deals with production companies such as Pol-Ka and Ideas del Sur.²² Their products were generally limited to canned television products that were offered to a network of professional contacts and associates in the Latin American region and in Europe, or infomercials (Schulein, 1986).

According to Hugo Di Gugliemo, an international media consultant in Buenos Aires and former Programming Director for Channel 13, this type of activity surfaced during the 1980s and 1990s. These years comprise the first of three distinct periods in the history of independent television production in Argentina (Di Gugliemo, 2014). During this time, independent producers were kept out of the market, or in direct competition with corporations with heavy foreign investment such as Endemol, Eyeworks-Cuatro Cabezas and RGB Entertainment.

Some of the reasons for the low incidence of independent television production in Argentina during this first phase include:

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- A global context that generated imported content at a fraction of the cost to produce content locally;
- Television production attached to the leading channels was restricted by a series of limitations including organizational issues (ingrained organizational schedules, habits and routines) and ideological issues (commercial imperatives favored or rejected certain topics);
- An absence of formal support and subsidies from the State;
- The barriers of entry to the industry, where costly technology and lack of access to production facilities kept potential new players out;
- Difficulty accessing the export market without an existing body of work, and market preference for series over one-off productions;
- A weak domestic market beyond a few channels in Buenos Aires; and
- The power of leading channels over domestic sales terms and co-production arrangements (Ulanovsky, 2009, pp. 33-35).

A second phase in the history of independent television production began in 2001/2002, following the economic crisis, when Argentina suddenly became a very attractive economic market for foreign production services based on a favorable exchange rate, and the availability of high quality directors and other artistic and creative talent (Di Gugliemo, 2014). In response to the currency devaluation and a drop in advertising expenditures, local broadcasters were forced to cut back on imported programming, and began experimenting with local adaptations of U.S. formats as viable alternatives. By 2005, Argentina was experiencing a record year in television production.

Telenovelas, sitcoms, comedies and weekly series were produced in record numbers, and actors, directors, and writers were in great demand. Such was the level of production that a lack of production space prompted construction plans for new facilities (M. Rodríguez, 2006, p. 313). By 2006 Argentina was exporting approximately 40,000 hours of television annually (Byrnes, 2006).

The localization trend has been traced back to Telefé's 2004 adaptation of *The Nanny (La Niñera)*, a Sony Pictures International TV sitcom (Newbery, 2005b). The work attached to producing local adaptations of *Married with Children*, *Who's the Boss*, *Bewitched* and *Charlie's Angels*, all of which had successful track records the domestic market, was helpful to Telefé's ability to successfully export formats such as *Montecristo* (2006).²³ Telefé was reportedly aggressively seeking partners to adapt fiction formats for France, Germany, the U.S. and the U.K., and likely found its track record with Sony helpful to negotiations (Timothy Havens, 2006).

Pol-Ka's international activities also took off around the same time, when BVI-Disney selected the company to produce Spanish- and Portuguese-language versions of *Desperate Housewives* for the Argentinian, Colombian, Ecuadorian, Brazilian and U.S. markets (Producciones)²⁴. Although the cost of production for *Desperate Housewives* in Argentina was undisclosed, *Variety* reported an estimate of twenty times less than the cost of production on Universal's back lot in the U.S. (A. M. de la Fuente, 2006). This

²³ Mexico, Colombia, Chile, Portugal and Russia produced adaptations, and Italy and Spain bought remake rights in 2007 (Newbery, 2006a) Over 40 countries bought the *telenovela* in its original form.

²⁴ Disney went so far as to purchase land and build a 'multi-season, multi-use facility' just outside of Buenos Aires, as a cost-effective measure.

included transporting members of the cast to Buenos Aires and providing them with housing (and tutoring for the youngest members) (Ibid).

All these activities effectively changed the course of independent television in the country forever. Production companies that were actively exporting their products and services prior to the crisis of 2001/2002, but did not consider those activities essential began not only to prioritize their international activities, but to consider them essential to recouping their production costs (Barbadori, 2012).

A third phase in the history of independent television production begins in 2006/2007 which coincides with a period of relative economic stabilization (Di Gugliemo, 2014). Di Gugliemo explains: Although Argentina was still considered a low-cost hub for production, the exchange rate is not as favorable as it once was, especially for some of its strong regional partners such as Mexico and Colombia, who were struggling with economic woes of their own. However, by this time, the surge in format trade worldwide was providing unlimited new opportunities for independent production, and Argentina was well very positioned to market its fiction formats.²⁵ Formats provided a vehicle to showcase Argentinian talent in a new way because the Argentinian accent that hindered its Spanish-language export activities in the past was no longer an issue (Di Gugliemo, 2014). Some of the international success stories beyond *Mujeres Asesinas*

²⁵ Formats appeared as a better option for Argentinian producers, relative to co-productions, because of a lack of investments in co-productions outside of Mexico (IberoAmerican Observatory on Television Fiction, 2008, p. 45). The main challenge associated with co-productions in the region is always deciding which audience you are ‘working for.’ The practice works best when co-productions are negotiated based on primary and secondary distribution windows or platforms rather than on discrete national audiences (Lagomarsino, 2014).

include *La Lola* (Underground Contenidos and Dori Media Group), a series that traveled to 15 countries before premiering in Argentina, *Los Roldán* (Ideas del Sur), and *Graduados* (Endemol/Underground Producciones). The number of television formats that did not conform to the soap opera, series or mini-series genres increased significantly, indicating that there was greater experimentation in the format production arena. Mexico became especially active in purchasing formats as well as the rights for new and old books and scripts from Argentinian authors to include in their own catalogs or to produce remakes (Di Gugliemo, 2014).

By 2008, international sales and production services accounted for 40%-50% of local producers' revenues (Newbery, 2008a). That same year, Argentina produced 1,597 hours of fiction (IberoAmerican Observatory on Television Fiction, 2009).

STATE INITIATIVES FOR INDEPENDENT TELEVISION PRODUCTION

A fourth phase in the history of independent television production in Argentina (by my own estimation) begins in 2011 when the sector received a boost from the State. It was then that the Instituto Nacional de Cine y Artes Audiovisuales (INCAA), the State entity in charge of advancing the national film industry since 1994, began to offer a separate funding line to support independent television production with the goal of filling the slates of public broadcasters and the anticipated State DTT network. Funding was provided in the form of subsidies to companies selected via a national competition.

In 2011 alone, the funding supported the production of 220 fiction series, and by 2012 an estimated 300 were in the pipeline (Newbery, 2012a). Most of the funding was distributed to smaller companies with less of a track record. Many of the themes

addressed in these productions centered on gender violence, discrimination, human rights, and other topics related to social and political issues that would generally be considered less attractive to commercial broadcasters (Ibid). It is important to clarify that these themes are not entirely absent from the highest rated programs, rather, they don't contain the didactic approach that seems to characterize many of the State-funded productions (Gustavo Aprea & Kirchheimer, 2012).²⁶

On the whole, these measures have been effective in increasing national fiction production in television. They have also had an impact on open television, as prime time hours once again began to feature national fiction productions, reversing a trend in recent years that favored reality programming. Fiction hours featured mostly *telenovelas* and comedies, but began to include more weekly series with diverse actors and unique storylines, as opposed to the daily schedules of the past. A few important trends emerged:

- A reduction in imported regional fiction, as broadcasters adjusted scheduling grids to meet new quotas for national content;
- A greater number of projects and more variety in programming produced by the leading production companies as they began to experiment with new options. New fiction with political themes, and written from opposing perspectives²⁷
- All new fiction products in 2011 experimented with transmedia, which generally included a dedicated website, and a presence on Facebook and Twitter.

²⁶ The didactic approach has been described as an indirect defense of socially-desirable values with limited entertainment value (Aprea, 2012, p. 112)

²⁷ For example, two productions loosely modeled on the confrontation between Grupo Clarín and the Kirchner government around a paper monopoly in the country made their way on to television screens and managed to generate debate around current issues (Aprea, 2012, p. 113).

Another important incentive was introduced in 2012, by way of a presidential decree. Decree number 1528/12 extended the same tax benefits enjoyed by the manufacturing sector to the creative audiovisual industries, including television, film and digital production (encompassing both public and private capital), and announced an increase in government subsidies for film production²⁸ ("Creative Industries in Argentina: A World-Class Center of Creativity," 2013). This strategic move was especially helpful to the local film industry, which had been vocal about the convoluted tax code that discouraged foreign investors and buyers.

The decree also established funding for the development of a new audiovisual center, Polo Audiovisual Isla Demarchi, in Puerto Madero (under construction at the time of this writing). These measures will likely boost Argentina's competitive advantage on the global audiovisual market well into the future (Sahores, 2012).

Today, Buenos Aires features the highest concentration of independent producers in Latin America (Gashe, 2010). The Argentine Observatory on Creative industries, (CAPIT), estimates that there are approximately 200 independent production companies in the country (2012, p. 14). These companies vary significantly in size, financial and production capacity as well as in focus or specialization. However, according to one government report, out of 200 or so active production companies in Argentina, less than 20 export content on a consistent basis. A significant number of smaller companies provide production and post-production services to foreign clients (2012, p. 28).

²⁸ Film subsidies have been around since the INCAA was created, however, the subsidy amount per film was increased from 3.5 to 5.5 Million Pesos

According to CAPIT's site, independent producers provide work for 4,500 individuals, including actors, directors, writers, journalists, technicians, etc. ("Creative Industries in Argentina: A World-Class Center of Creativity," 2013). Medium and large-sized content producers (generally identified based on their longevity and total number of hours of television programming) include: Pol-ka Producciones, Telefé Contenidos, Ideas del Sur, and Eyeworks Cuatro Cabezas, Promofilm, Underground Producciones, Cris Morena Group, and RGB Entertainment. Among these companies, Eyeworks, Underground, and RGB have heavy foreign investment.

In 2013, for the first time in history, over 300 representatives from the Argentinian television industry reportedly participated in the MIPCOM trade show, held in Cannes, France (Stiletano, 2013). Their products and services were highlighted under the encouragement of the INCAA, who coordinated their presence and promotion via two Argentinian Pavilions at the market (Ibid). *The Hollywood Reporter* noted Argentina's selection as MIPCOM's guest of honor, comparing it to Israel as one of the top exporters of television formats globally, and suggesting that Argentine creative "are arguably even more influential worldwide" (Roxborough, 2013).

EVOLVING BUSINESS MODELS AND RELATIONSHIPS

The business models attached to independent production in Argentina vary by company, but most content producers rely on several sources of income. These may include: canned program sales (either for open television or for pay television); format sales; co-productions; production services, product placement (PNT) deals, and a

percentage of the advertising revenue obtained by domestic channels when their programs are aired (Competencia, 2007).

In general, the private television channels in Argentina do not produce their own content beyond news content. The private channels purchase content from a variety of sources, but generally rely on their own content production subsidiaries (El Trece relies on Pol-Ka Producciones and Ideas del Sur, and Telefé relies on Telefé Contenidos).²⁹ The arrangements between channels and independent producers vary, but generally follow one of three patterns:

1. The channel provides the independent producer with a designated time slot on its grid in exchange for a set fee. This can be quite lucrative for the production company when the revenue it collects from advertising exceeds its expenses and provides an incentive to build non-traditional advertising into the content itself (Competencia, 2007, p. 28).
2. The channel and the production company share production expenses and advertising revenue;
3. The channel covers 100 percent of the production costs, and retains 100 percent of the advertising revenue (Ulanovsky, 2009).

These options are heavily influenced by cross-ownership patterns. For example, Artear, a marketing company, has been a primary client for both Pol-Ka and Ideas del Sur, for example. But not only is Artear a client; Artear owns a minority stake in both production companies.

²⁹ All of these companies have been careful to avoid overlap in their focus and specializations.

Content producers work closely with marketing companies who hold the broadcasting rights and cover the cost of promotion. Telefé has its own international sales division and Artear handles international sales of canned shows for El Trece and Pol-Ka (although Pol-Ka has worked with Dori as well). Israeli-based Dori Media Group has helped other independent producers access global markets for products and services, thanks to its strong presence at the global television markets and trade forums such as the Marche International des Programmes de Television (MIP) in France, National Association of Television Executives (NATPE) in the U.S., and MIP-Asia in Hong Kong, (D. M. Group, 2005). According to its published materials, Dori does not have legally-binding contracts with Argentinian producers, but has learned to hedge its risks with clients in Argentina (and Latin America more generally) which can include everything from working with longer payment cycles and difficulties in collecting revenue adverse tax consequences to currency fluctuations and laws and regulations that have favored local competition (D. M. Group, 2005).

INDUSTRY STRATEGY AND RELATIONSHIPS: THE POWER OF INDIVIDUAL ENTREPRENEURS

Some of these practices are not only highly revealing of the concentrated nature of the industry, but also speak to the power of certain individuals within that realm. As an example, Canal 9 hired Marcelo Tinelli away from Telefé in 2004 in an effort to better compete with Artear/Canal 13 and Telefé, the leading broadcasters (M. Rodríguez, 2006, p. 121). Tinelli is a popular television personality and impresario, host of a daily variety production called *ShowMatch*, and is also the owner of Ideas del Sur. *Showmatch* (previously titled *VideoMatch* at Telefé) is a variety show that includes humorous sketches, music, guests and involves the participation of a live audience.

While at Telefé, the show built a following and ranked as the fourth most watched show that year³⁰ (M. Rodríguez, 2005). The show also performed very well at Canal 9, and managed to pull ahead of Artear/Canal 13 to occupy the second place in ratings during the month of July for the first time in the channel's history (M. Rodríguez, 2006, p. 10). What was widely perceived as a risky professional move by industry peers (moving from the leading broadcaster to the third in rankings), proved to be a strategic *coup d'état* for Tinelli, who was subsequently hired away by (Grupo Clarín's) Artear/Canal 13 a few months later. The offer included a 4-year contract that included hosting *ShowMatch* on Canal 13, and a 30% financial stake in Ideas del Sur, in exchange for 13 to 18 hours of content per week. The USD \$5 Million investment in Ideas del Sur reportedly helped Tinelli avoid debt (Newbery, 2005a) and would provide broader media exposure via Clarin's properties.

From Clarín's perspective, the contract virtually eliminated potential competition for advertising spending from Canal 9. In addition, the deal included a joint venture between Producciones Pol-Ka and Ideas del Sur designed to strengthen their international export initiatives and better capture the format remake business that was beginning to flourish in Buenos Aires (Ibid). These changes would also reduce production costs by eliminating competition for talent (actors, producers, etc.) although there was some speculation about each of the organizations abilities to support a workforce of 550 people at Canal 13, 400 people at Pol-Ka and 370 people at Ideas del Sur (M. Rodríguez, 2005).

As an interesting side note, industry insiders questioned Tinelli's ability to perform as well at Canal 13 due to the demographic profile of its audience, which differed considerably from audiences at Telefé and Canal 9. The implication was that

³⁰ Videomatch's ranking was only outperformed by two one-hour specials and the top-rated show, Los Roldán, a Telefé production which was also exported successfully (p.10).

with *ShowMatch*, Canal 13 would be, for the first time, trying to appeal directly to audiences within the lowest socio-economic index in Argentina as a strategy to boost ratings (Ibid). While the show proved to be a ratings success, it also met with significant public criticism for what was referred to as the “Tinellization” of television -- Tinelli’s show is well known for its high shock value, mostly surrounding nudity and lewd commentary (Wortman, 2012).

These shifts also forced other channels to quickly alter their scheduling grid to compete with *Showmatch* (Sosa, 2010). And, because of the concentrated nature of Argentina’s open television environment, the changes also carried repercussions for other producers. Clarin’s investment in Ideas del Sur forced several of Tinelli’s associates at Ideas del Sur to branch out and launch a new fiction production house, while others were forced to shift their allegiances to local broadcasters (Cuatro Cabezas and Cris Morena went to Telefé, and GP was released from its partnership with Canal 13) (Ibid).

INDUSTRY DISRUPTIONS: ADVERTISING PRACTICES AND LABOR DISPUTES

Argentina has a long tradition of advertising production that is closely linked to its television industry. Local media groups have benefitted from the advertising revenue brought about by the injection of foreign capital from global companies interested in reaching mass local audiences, primarily through open television. The national Association of Advertising Agencies (AAP) lists 60 member agencies across the country, a figure that was recently updated to incorporate not only traditional agencies, but also direct marketing and interactive advertising companies (“Nuevos aires en la identidad,” 2013).

While advertising continues to be a relatively constant model for media in Argentina, the industry has experienced the destabilizing effects of the economic crisis of

2001, the global economic crisis of 2008, and more recently, a media dispersion trend that has audiences going online in greater numbers years ("Sobre la inversión publicitaria en los medios en Argentina," 2014). All of this has translated into a decline in advertising investment, which inevitably impacts the television industry (television attracts approximately 42 percent of advertising expenditures in the country) (Sinclair, 2009, p. 729).³¹

Both industries have been forced to adjust. For example, after being subjected to unprecedented/record losses in 2002, Argentina's advertising industry experienced a 60% recovery in 2003. This was attributed mainly to the implementation of two important industry strategies. The first was to increase the range of services for export³². The second was to increase spending on open television and bet heavily on product placement practices (otherwise known as PNT, *publicidad no tradicional*) (Govea, 2004).

To be clear, PNT is not a new phenomenon. Pol-ka Producciones was credited with being the first to introduce the practice in Argentina, with *Poliladrón* (1995-1997), but the practice peaked in 2003, when advertising agencies began creating entertainment content around their brands and funding productions to help attract target audiences that would appeal to their clients. General Motors funded *No es lo que parece*, a comedy show produced by Pol-Ka where a Chevrolet Meriva family car was highlighted as a lead 'character' on the show (Govea, 2004). Coca Cola's Quattro soft drink was written into the script of *Durmiendo con mi jefe*, a comedy show produced by Pol-ka, and Unilever funded *Mujeres en rojo* a reality show sponsored by one of its soap brands and produced by Cuatro Cabezas (Govea, 2004; Newbery, 2004b).

³¹ On a regional level, this figure is significant, especially when compared to Mexico and Brazil's much larger markets, in which television captures a 60 percent share. Sinclair noted that no comparative figures were available for free to air vs. pay television advertising expenditures.

³² Over 13,000 people are employed in advertising production for external markets (Gashe, 2010).

The trend continued in 2004, when Argentina's broadcasting regulator banned commercial breaks during movies on pay TV due to viewer complaints. Advertisers such as Coca Cola and Unilever, who had up until then relied on cable television's 50% household reach, were suddenly forced to adjust their ad spending and take it elsewhere (Newbery, 2004a). Shows such as *Asuntos pendientes*, a prime-time one-hour show developed by an ad agency, Agulla & Bacetti, and co-produced with Cuatro Cabezas for open television provided a profitable solution. This particular show centered on unsolved crimes by pitting alleged culprits and their victims against each other in a highly-charged discussion format (Newbery, 2004b). The show aired during prime-time on Artear/Canal 13, and the agency recouped its investment by taking a share of ad time sales during the program (Ibid).

In 2007, actors formulated an objection to the practice of product placement in relation to unfair terms of employment and compensation. The Argentine Association of Actors (AAA) took the complaint to the Argentine Chamber of Independent Television Producers (CAPIT) and the association of broadcasters (Asociación de Telerradiodifusoras Argentinas, ATA), but negotiations failed. In retaliation to demands made by the actor's union, producers staged a shut-out. They closed production studios, while broadcasters scrambled to remove local fiction programming from their grids, and renegotiate contracts with advertisers (Tzrenko, 2007). Because 75% of fiction aired on the television schedule in Argentina is produced mostly by 5 independent producers (Cris Morena Group, Dori Media Group, Endemol, Ideas del Sur and Pol-ka), the television landscape was altered within the span of days (Newbery, 2007a). Production for shows like *Mujeres de Nadie*, *Patito Feo*, *Son de Fierro* and *El hombre que volvió de la muerte* came to a halt, producers and broadcasters suffered undisclosed financial losses, and audiences were left to deal with constant changes on the daily television schedule.

CAPIT and ATA insisted that the demands made by the actor's union were excessive (130% increases in compensation for actors under contract and 335% increases for extras). Producers had offered increases of 40%, which they felt were in line with the \$8,000-\$40,000 cost per episode that broadcasters pay for fiction productions (Newbery, 2007b). Actors were also pushing for a shift of 8.45 hours, protesting what had become a standard 11-hour shift. In protest, they worked in 6.5-hour shifts (a union stipulation in place since 1975) before the dispute came to a head and all parties were forced to meet. Producers insisted that "in order to make a daily, one-hour episode of a *telenovela*, actors must be available at least nine hours a day or production is impossible" (Newbery, 2007a).

In response, the actors union took its issues to the Ministry of Labor (Tzrenko, 2007) and an agreement was finally brokered 10 days later with the assistance of Carlos Rottemberg,³³ who acted as an independent mediator (Tzrenko, 2007). As a result, the association of actors agreed to work 9-hour studio shifts with a one-hour lunch, and receive minimum salaries of 6,300 pesos (USD \$2,000) per month (Maziotti, 2009, p. 66). No consensus was reached regarding financial compensation specifically related to product placement practices.

ISSUES OF CLASS IN INDUSTRY PRACTICES

Class issues permeate other aspects of the industry's practices, including perceptions of the audience. As *Telefé* and *El Trece* experienced these operational upheavals in 2007, the prime time schedule across both stations was filled with reality programming. When *El Trece* introduced imported reality programming in the afternoon schedule, which had been traditionally reserved for Argentinian and Latin American

³³ Rottemberg, a theater and television entrepreneur, has been an outspoken critic of what he refers to as the "Tinellization" of Argentine television. He is not a member of the Argentine producers association.

telenovelas, the station pulled ahead of Telefé in the same time slots. The station's programming grid was also somewhat more stable than Telefés, where frequent scheduling changes became the target of public criticism (Rodríguez, 2009). Telefé relied on several iterations of the *Big Brother* franchise, including a celebrity version over the entire year (p. 59). El Trece responded with a series of contest shows hosted by Marcello Tinelli that relied on promoting on-air friction between judges and celebrities, and erotically charged and scantily-clad dance numbers (p. 60).

Shifts in genre (from fiction to reality/entertainment shows) met with resistance from insiders who were used to old formulas associated with certain production houses. According to Ana Wortman, a cultural sociologist at the University of Buenos Aires, "Pol-ka always focuses on "the importance of the common person who can pull himself out of a situation by his own ability" in its series (Newbery, 2011). The production house gravitates to settings and characters that inhabit neighborhoods on the lower end of the socio-economic scale. In a similar way, Marcelo Tinelli "comes across as one of us, as a kid from the neighborhood who has triumphed like we all want to," Wortman says.

MUJERES ASESINAS, THE BOOK

Mujeres Asesinas (Grinstein, 2000) was published by Grupo Editorial Norma with an initial run of 12,000 copies. The book's author, Marisa Grinstein, is a journalist who covered the political beat for *El Heraldo de Buenos Aires* for over 10 years. Grinstein described the impetus for writing the book as follows: "When I wrote the book, my motivation was very clear: I wasn't as interested in the crime itself as I was interested in exploring these women's motivations for committing murder. Most of them are not crazy assassins; they are women whose lives are stories of suffering" (Pérez Raigosa Enviada,

2008). Grinstein began to investigate murder cases covered by the local press between 1940 and 2000 (Ibid) in 1998, and 13 of those cases were detailed in the first book.

The case that first spiked Grinstein's interest centered on a Lebanese immigrant, Emilia Basil, who murdered her lover, an Italian immigrant, after he began demanding that she leave her husband ("Narra Grinstein experiencias que dieron origen a 'Mujeres asesinas'," 2008). He reportedly financed the restaurant/home she and her husband established in Buenos Aires, and also happened to live on the premises, in the same building. When their business suffered, he reportedly used the sexual relationship as a 'form of payment' against the couples' debt. The 1973 case received significant media attention based on a particularly unusual and gruesome set of details surrounding the murder. Emilia Basil murdered the victim, mutilated the body and made *empanadas* (Argentinian meat-filled pastries) with this remains, which she sold to the public through the restaurant. Basil was sentenced to 10 years in prison and was released in 1979, before completing her sentence.

Each chapter in the book covers one case, and details the events leading up to the act of homicide -- from the perspective of the lead character. Each of the chapter titles includes the woman's name followed by an adjective to indicate either her profession, her personality or her method. For example: Emilia Basil, Cook; María Ofelia Lombardo, Protector; and Graciela Hammer, Arsonist. These texts are hybrid in the sense that the stories are drawn directly from journalistic accounts of the murders (known as the "*notas rojas*" or yellow journalism), police notes and legal proceedings detailed in the press, and in some cases, published interviews with the women, when they were available (as in the case of Yiya Murano, who received a lot of attention in the press upon her release from prison after serving a 16-year sentence). However, the accounts are fictionalized in order to allow the lead character to tell her own story. As Di Paolo (2011a) notes:

“Women are only in the news when they become victims or murderers in cases of domestic violence, but journalists do not cover the homicide in a responsible manner. Instead, the information that is presented is fragmented, imprecise, and one-sided. The gravity of the event is diluted and the report focuses on the gruesome details of the event”(p. 246).

The stories are told in a clean, almost journalistic style that, for the most part, is devoid of literary embellishment. According to Osvaldo Di Paolo, *Mujeres Asesinas* fits within a tradition of popular Argentine crime fiction literature (the oldest in Latin America) that invites readers to engage with the moral dilemmas that afflict the characters and the societies they inhabit without passing judgment, *but is the first to be translated to the small screen* (2011b). He argues that although Argentina has a long tradition of crime fiction that dates back to 1877 when Luis Varela penned the first detective fiction novel, this particular strand of crime fiction literature is reflective (in a broader sense), of the crisis the country was undergoing during the decade of Raúl Menem’s presidency (1989-1999). As a result of Menem’s neo-liberalist economic agenda, the country experienced skyrocketing foreign debt, a doubling of the unemployment rate, increased poverty and a greater concentration of wealth (p.25). This led to a rise in crime and widespread concern with personal safety.³⁴

In 1994, Editorial Planeta was the first to publish dozens of novels inspired by journalistic accounts of homicide in the local press. Di Paolo identifies this trend as a hybrid sub-genre of the crime fiction novel tradition, because stories are always drawn from journalistic and police notes and shaped with the tools of literature as novels or short stories, which are later adapted for television or film. The transformations may

³⁴ During the 1990s crime rate increased by 150 percent. Robberies increased by 241 percent and homicides increased by 23 percent for every 100,000 people (Di Paolo, 2011, p.26).

include embellishing or eliminating details about characters and circumstances, textual symbolism and esthetics, so they become, in a sense, quasi-fictional (p.21).

Katherine Ostrom (2011) has identified a similar sub-strand of Latin American crime fiction that she associates with the work of several authors in Brazil and Argentina that specifically draw attention to forms of violence against women. She believes this work incorporates elements of an Anglo hard-boiled crime fiction, but opens up new possibilities of meaning within a genre that has excluded women's voices. She explains:

“If hard-boiled fiction has a stronger potential than classical detective fiction to be transgressive in its attitude toward the powerful, it also has a stronger history of misogyny – not only in terms of the way female characters are treated in foundational works of the genre, but also because of a structure that values the individual, antisocial, hyper-masculine private eye. Women and feminists writing hardboiled fiction in Latin America are innovators and rare exceptions to the rules of the game, often bending and breaking those rules with their work, and for this reason deserve special attention rather than to be ignored or mentioned only in passing.”

According to Ostrom, a central feature of this type of work is to explore individual versus collective responsibility for violence. And, although Grinstein's work was not included in her analysis, *Mujeres Asesinas* would fit the description.

Encouraged by the blockbuster success of the book, Grinstein was approached by Victor Tevah, who was Producciones Pol-Ka's Director of Content at the time, about their interest in developing an adaptation for television.³⁵ Grinstein had been approached by others before Pol-Ka, but rejected the offers because she felt they were going to “treat the murderers as crazy women who committed murder because they were hysterical or

³⁵ It is interesting to note that Victor Tevah first became aware of the book in the Miami International Airport, where he purchased it while traveling (Tevah, 2014). This (informally) proved the book's visibility and relative commercial success within the international publishing industry three years after it was published in Buenos Aires.

were hormonally unbalanced.” She offered the following rationale for choosing to work with Pol-Ka:

“Truthfully, in every *Mujeres Asesinas* book I focused on what led the women to make such a drastic decision. I always found that the women had incredible personal histories replete with drama, from family violence, and mothers who abused them, to husbands who dominated them, etc. I felt that they (Producciones) were going to operate with the same level of respect and care that I used to present their stories and the characters” (Di Paolo, 2011b, p. 136).

This would be the first collaboration between Pol-Ka and Grinstein, and also Grinstein’s first time to write for television. Tevah explained that it was important to have Grinstein involved, so they brought in fellow journalist and scriptwriter Liliana Escliar to work with her (Tevah, 2014). Escliar had recently published two successful satirical books from a feminist perspective: “*Como deshacerse del marido* (How to Get Rid of a Husband) and *La máquina de sufrir* (The Machine of Suffering). Grinstein and Escliar worked on the scripts for over a year, and elected to leave some cases out of the book because “they were so cruel that no one would believe they were true” (Castelo). Their work on the series eventually led them to establish a formal business partnership (Tevah, 2014) and receive a prize for scriptwriting from the Konex Foundation in 2011.

By 2005, when the series debuted, Grinstein had regained exclusive rights to the book from the publisher and was able to successfully negotiate publishing rights with Random House Mondadori (previously Editorial Sudamericana) for a second edition, which would be published to coincide with the launch of the television series (Tevah, 2014). Once the TV series became a runaway success, Grinstein published *Mujeres Asesinas 2: los nuevos casos* (2006), and *Mujeres Asesinas 3* (2007) also with Random House Mondadori. In addition, Random House Mondadori also released the book in Mexico to coincide with the launch of the Mexican adaptation. The initial run of 12,000

copies, under the Plaza & Janes seal, was a reissue of the original best-seller by Marisa Grinstein ("Publican en Mexico "Mujeres asesinas" cuando triunfa la serie de TV homónima: MÉXICO-LIBROS," 2008).

It is important to include a note here about an issue that came up following the broadcast success of *Mujeres Asesinas*. The first book (and the first season of the television series) included the real names of the 14 women whose cases were featured. This led to a lawsuit against Pol-Ka, Channel 13 and the author, Marisa Grinstein in 2012, by some of the women and their families, who claimed that their names were used without permission and questioned the “fictionalization” of some of the details of their cases ("Responsabilidad de guionistas, productor y empresa televisiva por difundir hechos inexactos en unitario televisivo que afectan a la actora.," 2012). From all reports, Grinstein bore the full consequences of the lawsuit, as the contract signed between Grinstein and Pol-Ka protected the production company from liability (Piñeiro, 2013). No details were available on the contract between Pol-Ka and Marisa Grinstein, but as a general practice, writers in Argentina are generally compensated with a flat fee for the script (in the range of USD \$2,500-5,000 for domestic productions), and also receive a modest fee (calculated as a percentage of the foreign sales) by country (Lagomarsino, 2014).

Mujeres Asesinas is widely considered to be among the books with the largest sales track history in Argentina, although no data was available to confirm this. As Di Paolo points out, the book’s appearance follows a turbulent decade in Argentina’s history. However, this fact, in itself, does not explain the popularity of the book, as after all, all societies, at some level, experience issues with crime. The key here is that *Mujeres Asesinas* flips the conventional narrative of the stories that are told, because statistics support the notion that women are generally not the perpetrators of crimes; they are by

large, the victims of crime. In this sense, the local and international success of the book rests on its ability to ‘deterritorialize’ (or universalize?) two important themes: unusual stories of women as perpetrators of heinous crimes, and the experience of violence as a common denominator in contemporary society (Ibid, p.170).

FROM BESTSELLING BOOK TO SURPRISE HIT TELEVISION SERIES

Before *Mujeres Asesinas* was translated to the small screen in 2005, the producers contemplated developing the content for export, but in the end, decided to focus on the domestic audience. The idea for the television adaptation was initially pitched by Victor Tevah (Polka’s Director of Content at the time), to Adrian Suar, owner and Director Creative Projects, as a project with significant export potential. Tevah may have been encouraged by the work the production house had recently completed for HBO Latinoamerica. *Epitafios*, a critically-acclaimed crime drama, was Pol-Ka’s first project for HBO, and a second project was already under development for ABC: Spanish- and Portuguese-language versions of *Desperate Housewives* for Argentina, Colombia, Ecuador and Brazil (Byrnes, 2006).

Tevah took the proposal for *Mujeres Asesinas* to HBO Latinoamerica, but it was rejected because each of the 60-minute episodes featured a self-contained story, with a distinct beginning and end, with no continuity in the storyline or characters from one episode to another. According to Tevah, executives at HBO loved the series concept, but objected to the self-contained nature of the episodes. They were looking for projects ‘with potential for multiple seasons,’ and at that point only 13 episodes were planned, so they rejected the opportunity. Tevah pitched the series to other majors in the U.S. and in Europe, including Canal Plus, who also expressed interest in the concept, but rejected it for the same reason (Tevah, 2014). Tevah wanted to continue pitching the project abroad,

but Suar elected to move forward with the production in house and focus on a domestic audience.³⁶ The target audience for the series was men and women, ages 25-50 (Tevah, 2014).³⁷

Mujeres Asesinas achieved phenomenal success in a short amount of time. The first season ran from July 19 to December 13, 2005, on a once-weekly 11 p.m. slot in the prime-time schedule (in Argentina, the prime-time schedule begins at 8 p.m. and ends at 12 a.m.). During its first season, *Mujeres Asesinas* was ranked number one among weekly series, with an average rating of 18.5 (M. Rodríguez, 2006). Although only 13 episodes were initially planned (to coincide with the book), the series achieved such high ratings that Pol-Ka quickly developed another 9 episodes. The first season ended with 22 episodes, including two repeat episodes that aired on December 20 and 27 (this period of the year coincides with summer in the Southern hemisphere, and is generally used as a period to begin promoting program offerings for the following television season). The series received a string of awards, including the Golden Martín Fierro Award, the highest award granted by APTRA, the Association of Journalists of Television and Radio Argentina (Nación, 2006). Once the first season closed, Pol-ka began to work on a format book to take to the international market (Tevah, 2014).

³⁶ According to a company representative who has been with Pol-Ka since its inception, Suar is the person who holds decision-making power over the production, including such details as the selection of a theme song ("Hablan los expertos: Adrian Suar y Cris Morena dan el tono," 2005). For *Mujeres Asesinas*, Suar selected "Malo," a song with lyrics that make explicit reference to domestic abuse and gender violence (Ramos, 2005). The song, by Spanish singer/songwriter/actress Bebe, gained international recognition in 2005, when the artist won "Best New Artist" category in the Latin Grammy Music Awards ("Bebe (singer)"). This decision suggests that even though the series was explicitly produced for a domestic audience, Pol-Ka was, in fact, banking on its export potential.

³⁷ Data for the third season of *Mujeres Asesinas* (2007) reveals that the audience was almost evenly split between men (45 percent) and women (55 percent). The distribution by age group was ages 4-12 (15 percent); 13 to 19 (20 percent); 20 to 34 (23 percent); 35 to 49 (23 percent) and over 50 (19 percent) (IberoAmerican Observatory on Television Fiction, 2009, p. 81).

During the second season, 37 episodes of *Mujeres Asesinas* were broadcast on a weekly schedule, Tuesday nights at 11 PM, between April 11 and December 19 of 2006, with a schedule change after July 11, when the show was moved to an 11:30 PM start time. A shifting television schedule was a major point of contention in 2006. In an interview, Adrián Suar was asked about ongoing tension with Claudio Villarroel, program director at Telefé, over scheduling changes related to vying for a lead in the prime time ratings. He responded: “In the effort to defend the key hours one has to begin to take certain measures, but we never lost an audience over changes in the schedule. In fact, even when there was no competition, and a program ended much later, people would continue to watch faithfully. It also reflects a habit that Argentinians have, of going to bed much later than most. Even so, in 2007 we will try to adjust this and end a little earlier”(M. Rodríguez, 2007)

Regardless of the scheduling changes, *Mujeres Asesinas* performed very well in its second season, ranking second against other weekly series in 2006³⁸. The series closed the year with an average rating of 20.7, which was up by two points from the previous year (M. Rodríguez, 2007), and once again received critical acclaim.

The third season featured only 7 episodes, which aired between April 11 and July 2, 2007. FIFA World cup soccer matches all but dominated the ratings that year, and caused disruptions in local television scene. Telefé had been the ratings leader during prime time hours for over a decade until El Trece took the lead during 2006 (IberoAmerican Observatory on Television Fiction, 2008, p. 58). Grupo Clarín held the broadcasting rights to the World Cup, making it difficult for Telefé to compete; among

³⁸ The number one ranked series in 2006 was “*Hermanos y Detectives*,” a Telefé production, which aired September through November, 2006. *Hermanos y Detectives* was remade by Telecinco in Spain, Televisa Networks in Mexico, and ABC purchased the format rights for the U.S. market, but the show has never aired.

the top 20 programs with the highest ratings in 2006, 13 were World Cup soccer matches (M. Rodríguez, 2007, p. 12). Arctear/Canal 13 also gained audiences with *ShowMatch*, a dance show that was once the top entertainment program on Telefé (Newbery, 2011). These shows dominated prime time ratings, helping El Trece pull ahead of Telefé in that schedule every month of the year April through December (M. Rodríguez, 2007, p. 339), despite the labor upheavals that interrupted television production and altered the programming grid (see page 32).

The fourth and final season featured 12 episodes, which aired between January 8 and March 25, 2008. The ratings average plunged to 8.9 points and the audience share to 31.8% (IberoAmerican Observatory on Television Fiction, 2008, p. 75). The ripple effects of a global economic crisis were beginning to impact the local television industry, and advertisers had already announced budget cuts for 2009, which prompted Suar to cancel or modify a few projects due to the economic uncertainty (p.64). It is important to note that the five out of the 12 most watched shows from Pol-ka in 2008 were sports-related (with four occupying the top rankings, and two other fiction series placing ahead of *Mujeres Asesinas: Son de fierro and Por amor a vos*).

Within three years (2005-2008) four seasons of *Mujeres Asesinas* (78 episodes in total) were produced and broadcast on *El Trece*. The series was praised for its high-production values, well-known actresses, and was critically acclaimed as one of the best series ever produced in Argentina. Canned versions of the Argentinian series have traveled to Mexico, Chile, France and several Eastern European countries. The *Mujeres Asesinas* format has been adapted in Colombia, Ecuador, Ecuador, Italy, Mexico and the U.S., in that order.

THE MUJERES ASESINAS “FORMULA”

The *Mujeres Asesinas* format formula relies on three key elements. The first is its cast of well-known and well-loved actors (157 actors participated in the production over the course of four seasons, including Argentinian nationals and foreign actors). Because there is no continuity from one episode to another, *Mujeres Asesinas* would capitalize on this practice, but initially some actors expressed fear and hesitation about playing a criminal on television (Castelo, 2005). Most of the cases had been highly publicized in the media, and some of the women who had committed these crimes were alive and visible on the public stage. Some even enjoyed a quasi-celebrity status, such as Yiya Murano (known as *La Envenenadora de Monserrat*), who insisted she was innocent during interviews on television and in the press. Murano was sentenced to life in prison for poisoning 3 victims with cyanide-laced baked goods to avoid repaying her debts, but was granted early release³⁹ (Di Paolo, 2011a), so was “at large” when production on the series began.

What happened once the series launched came as a complete surprise to the producer:

“The goal was to feature actors with a proven track record, including well-known actors from the film industry, such as Cecilia Roth, who had never worked in television. What happened, partly by accident, was that once the series launched and became so popular, well-known actors, including well-known *telenovela* actors like Andrea del Boca, Luisa Kulioc, Nacha Guevara, and Ana Maria Orozco (who had only done *Betty La Fea* on television up until that point) began to call us requesting that we please consider them for a lead role in the series. They became very interested in playing these unusual roles.” (Tevah, 2014)

³⁹ The series capitalized on this, by scheduling the episode that featured Murano’s case as the season opener in 2006, and promoting it as early as December 2005, when production wrapped, and throughout the three months leading up to the season launch.

One actor, Cristina Banegas, who has appeared in more than fifty films, expressed some difficulty working with *Mujeres Asesinas*. In an interview, she admitted that viewers, people she encounters on the street, now recognize her as ‘a villain.’ She continued:

The way they look at me is different, almost as if to ask why I am so evil. It is difficult, because when you play these roles, you are not immune to them. After watching some of the episodes, as a spectator, I have felt fear. To delve into the darkness of the human soul is not easy” (Cabrera, 2006).

This practice of placing well-known actors in unfamiliar roles is a signature strategy the series employs and exploits with great success in its promotional efforts, and one that was replicated by the Mexican remake.

A second element of the *Mujeres Asesinas* formula requires highlighting the reality-based aspect of these fictionalized accounts. Victor Tevah, the show’s producer, explained that it was important not to present the lead characters as murderers from the beginning of each episode in order to give viewers an opportunity to understand their motives. However, each episode was required to integrate a standard element, which was to end with a brief description of the legal outcome of each case (Tevah, 2014). In addition, Tevah explained that ‘the team’ felt it was important to include and highlight moments in the plot when it would have been appropriate for the women to seek help, potentially avoiding the tragic outcome. Although this might suggest a didactic mission, the series never directly engages with that, or addresses it explicitly.

A third element centered on incorporating flexibility into the narrative structure across all episodes in order to provide directors with a certain level of freedom to modify the script or production according to their particular vision (Tevah, 2014). Four directors, Daniel Barone, Jorge Nisco, Alberto Lecchi and Sebastián Pivotto, took turns working on episodes for the series. Tevah described some episode themes as “dense,” requiring a

certain kind of treatment, but also admitted to slight variations in genre across the series, so that in some cases it became possible to insert dramatic comedic elements (Tevah, 2014).

One director, Daniel Barone, considers *unitarios* (anthology series, like *Mujeres Asesinas*) an intermediate step between film and television. The benefit of working on *unitarios* is “the opportunity to work more closely with actors to fully develop their characters and incorporate them into the creative process, as well as the option to better tailor the visual aesthetics to the storyline” (Marciano, 2008). Director Jorge Nisco did not hesitate to describe his own approach to *Mujeres Asesinas* as a ‘cinematographic’ approach:

“The goal is to slowly immerse the viewer in (each of the women’s) psychological profile. This is why the series features tempos and visual framing that are not typical of television. These are psychological dramas, not police procedurals. So, it is not as important for us to work towards showing how the episode ends, because we all know how it is going to end. Instead, we focus on how we got there.” (Cabrera, 2006).

The visual and aesthetic elements across the series are often dark and foreboding, in a nod to film noir or cinema vérité, and in some cases, hand-held camera sequences are used to intensify a sense of gritty realism -- a treatment that is reminiscent of documentary realism. The creative challenges associated with taking these approaches to television were likely intensified due to a tight production schedule designed to keep costs down. The production schedule for *Mujeres Asesinas* was narrowed down to a ten-day window, with five days dedicated to pre-production, and five dedicated to filming and editing (Marciano, 2008). Because these were all self-contained episodes, the cost associated with changing sets and rotating the cast and creative talent would generally be greater than with *telenovelas*, for example, which use specific sets and actors throughout the entire production. The average cost per episode of *Mujeres Asesinas*, which varied by

year, was the equivalent of USD \$50,000 (Tevah, 2014), which registers on the higher end of local production budgets in Argentina at the time.

MUJERES ASESINAS, GENRE, AND GENDER RELATIONS

In order to consider what has attracted and sustained audiences, it is also helpful to situate the show in reference to its treatment of gender, genre, and to the broader sociocultural context. It is clear that *Mujeres Asesinas* borrows from the *telenovela* tradition, but departs from it in a way that is not immediately apparent to viewers: the women depicted in the series are presented as fully-developed characters rather than as stereotypes. Scriptwriter Liliana Esliar described the shift as follows:

“Women on television are shifting away from stereotypes. We are no longer seeing the ‘evil woman’ of *telenovelas*, or the paraplegic, or the destitute woman who falls in love with a millionaire. Before they would come out and say their lines, and then return to their proper place. We are not Barbies, and we are not monsters. And that’s a good thing.” (Castelo, 2005).

The women are flawed, but they also have redeeming qualities. They come from all walks of life, are of various ages, and (at least, on the surface) don’t seem very different from many of the viewers who tune in to watch each week. The characters are immersed in the process of trying to lead their daily lives around difficult circumstances, whether they happen to be women who work from home in the *barrio*, or professionals in their place of employment. The narratives offer multiple sites for identification, in their assumed roles as wives, mothers, partners, friends, and in relation to the men in their lives. Author Marisa Grinstein believes the success of the formula hinges precisely on its viewer’s ability to identify with the characters:

“What helps the series is the reality that women are at a disadvantage with respect to men. She (the viewer) works just as hard, but earns less, or she may have a husband who hates the fact that she earns more than he does.

So, when she watches the show, it feels like a form of liberation from all the small injustices she experiences in her own life, only from a foreign place, because she remains safe; someone else commits the transgression and not her” (Derni, 2006).

In this way, *Mujeres Asesinas* draws heavily on the melodramatic form of the *telenovela* genre, to “ceaselessly offer an audience dramas of recognition and re-cognition by locating social and political issues in personal and familial terms, and thus making sense of an increasingly complex world” (López, 1995, p. 258.) However, the tension between fiction and reality allows viewers to experience a certain level of empathy with the characters based on their familial choices and social circumstances, while simultaneously distancing themselves from what they see. The women become criminals, but audiences are left to answer the question of whether these women are victims or heroines for themselves.

According to Elena Fajardo Galán, fiction series produced in Argentina over the last few years now “provide an opportunity to highlight certain themes directly related to women; themes that were all but invisible on television, like gender violence, sexual harassment, immigration, homosexuality, or the challenges of balancing family obligations and employment commitments. These are all conflicts that are at the forefront of our society” (Galera, 2008). As reality-based fiction, *Mujeres Asesinas* provides a very particular (skewed?) view of Argentinian society, but on a broader scale, may also reflect subtle changes in the broader milieu. Violence and gender-based violence are common features of daily life in Argentina, but many of the crimes go unreported and unpunished. One director, Pablo Culler (also a partner in Underground Contenidos) believes that

violence in fiction plays a cathartic role in people's lives. He adds: "People have lost that sense of ingenuity with which they used to watch television. Because they see violence on the streets and on the news, stories can no longer be told in a "light" manner. Audiences demand more" (Bonachi, 2005).

To complicate matters, reliable statistics on gender-based violence and femicide⁴⁰ are difficult to come by, but one international report ranked Argentina fourth (after Mexico, Guatemala and Costa Rica) among the countries of Latin America for femicide and gender-related crimes, (V. R. de la Fuente, 2012). According to a representative from the Federal Penitentiary, the percentage of men sentenced to prison for homicide is 'much greater' than that of women (Ripetta, 2007). A local NGO, La Casa del Encuentro, estimated that 295 femicides occurred in the country in 2013. Their independent study, which is based solely on cases reported by online and printed media, is regarded as the only (unofficial) source of statistics on femicide in the country since 2008 ("International Women's Day in Buenos Aires," 2014).⁴¹ The organization has actively used the data to pursue a communications, research and policy agenda that has met with a measure of success. For example, in 2012, the government modified the legal code to incorporate femicide and gender violence as crimes punishable by law for the first time in the nation's history ("La Cámara baja sancionó el proyecto original para penalizar el femicidio," 2014) and to include provisions for some of the most progressive transgender rights in the world (Warren, 2012).

⁴⁰ Femicide is broadly defined as the killing of women, but definitions vary by cultural context. For the purposes of this study, femicide is defined as the murder of women or trans by virtue of their gender, or motivated, either directly or indirectly, by misogynist or sexist views.

⁴¹ No official data is available, and what is available is incomplete.

POL-KA PRODUCCIONES' INCURSION INTO HOLLYWOOD

Pol-ka Producciones is the first Argentinian production company, and the third in Latin America, to land a format in Hollywood (Rodriguez Ansorena, 2013). Alex Lagomarsino, CEO of MediaBIZ (an international entertainment business/talent agency that has handled Pol-ka's format sales and service contracts since 2001), said he tried, unsuccessfully, to negotiate a deal with Lionsgate and Televisa for an English-language remake, over the course of 6 years. Lagomarsino credits Pedro Torres (CEO of Mediamates in Mexico) with arranging an introduction to Luis Balaguer, of LatinWe, a U.S.- production company headed by Balaguer and Sofia Vergara, of *Modern Family* fame (Lagomarsino, 2014). The meeting was held during the NATPE trade market in January of 2009, less than one year after Mediamates launched its own commercially successful co-production of *Mujeres Asesinas* for Mexico, with the participation of Televisa ("Pol-ka refuerza su apuesta internacional," 2009). LatinWe purchased the rights to *Mujeres Asesinas* for an English-language version, attached a well-known director and scriptwriter to the project, and successfully pitched the series to ABC. ABC financed the pilot for \$7 Million (Rodriguez Ansorena, 2013; Xinhua, 2013).

Killer Women premiered on ABC on January 7, 2014 in a 10 p.m. PST/9 p.m. CST Tuesday night slot, featuring an international cast of characters.⁴² ("Killer Women, Mind Games: New Dramas to Air Tuesdays," 2013). The show starred Tricia Hiefer in the role of a Texas Ranger who solves cases of murders of passion committed by women (the series carried little resemblance to the original series). The show was cancelled after the first few episodes due to faltering ratings (Moreno, 2012).

⁴² *Mujeres Asesinas* was scheduled in a timeslot that ABC was having trouble with; the two previous series *Lucky 7* and a rebroadcast of *Body of Proof* were also unsuccessful ("Killer Women, Mind Games: New Dramas to Air Tuesdays," 2013)

It is interesting to note that during a video interview held shortly after ABC/Lionsgate made a public announcement about an English-language remake of *Mujeres Asesinas* (Killer Women) at NATPE in 2012, Pedro Torres stated that he fully expected El Mall and Televisa to handle production of the English-language adaptation of the series ("Cuando pegas un hit en Televisa el mundo te voltea a ver," 2012), which turned out not to be the case. Torres held the licensing rights for the U.S., however, the rights were likely restricted to the Spanish-language market. It is unclear if or how Mediamates may have profited from the deal.

In a published interview, Pol-ka's co-owner, Fernando Blanco, credited 'an alliance' with Televisa for the business deal with ABC/Lionsgate: "They invest in our productions and then generate important format business deals, like the one with ABC. The project marks a turning point for us, since every independent producer's dream in a Third World country is to have their products on U.S. networks, and so few make it there" ("Pol-ka, talento high-end para proyectos exigentes," 2013).

Blanco also expressed interest in developing co-productions with Televisa that could air in Argentina and Mexico and/or go on to Univisión (he made it clear that these types of projects had been proposed, but had not yet materialized) (Ibid). According to Alex Lagomarsino, the main challenge with that type of arrangement is always determining which audience 'you are working for' because two distinct national markets are involved. He believes the regional trend in co-productions is shifting the focus from producing for distinct national audiences, to a model that is based on primary and secondary distribution windows instead (Lagomarsino, 2014).

Although the relationship with Televisa has been crucial to Pol-Ka's successful international projection, the company has been able to capture other notable business ventures for production services. Most recently (2012), Pol-Ka produced *Violetta*, the

first co-production of Disney Channels Latin America, Europe, Middle East and Africa. The musical comedy series for teens was shot entirely in Buenos Aires and included actors from across Latin America, Brazil, Spain and Italy ("Pol-ka refuerza su apuesta internacional," 2009).

Beyond providing production services for foreign shows, Pol-Ka's stated goal is to continue seeking international partnerships that include the company's active creative participation in the production process ("Pol-ka refuerza su apuesta internacional," 2009). Projects such as *Epitafios*, a 13-episode crime series (2004), illustrate this type of arrangement: Pol-Ka sold the script and the distribution rights for 20 countries to HBO Latinoamérica, and was contracted by HBO to produce the show in Buenos Aires. The show did so well that it later aired on HBO Latino and on a subsidiary channel (HBO Signature Channel, in Spanish with English subtitles) in the U.S. (Shales, 2005).

Approximately 50% of Pol-Ka's business is derived from international sales ("Pol-ka, talento high-end para proyectos exigentes," 2013). The next step, according to Lagomarsino, is to try to gain a foothold within the Anglo U.S. market for creative talent and production services, while also promoting their services for U.S products destined for Latin American market. To that end, Lagomarsino's company, MediaBIZ (which also represents a number of other companies and individuals in Argentina, Colombia and Chile) is in the process of establishing a second office in Hollywood (Lagomarsino, 2014).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

As this case study of the production of *Mujeres Asesinas* in Argentina shows, the commercial and critical success of the series was brought about by a confluence of factors, which are local, national and transnational in nature. Although the transnational

influence on the Argentinian context has been significant, this study demonstrates that the State, and national policy, continue to play very important roles in steering the national audiovisual industry forward (Waisbord, 2013). An increasingly dynamic television content production industry, with its own distinct business culture and challenges, is evolving and exploring ways to better expand its global reach. Argentina's new status as the fourth leading global exporter of television formats, and *Mujeres Asesinas*' status as the first format from Argentina to be remade in Hollywood for a U.S. mainstream audience, provides further evidence to support the assertion that important shifts are happening in the margins (Oren & Shahaf, 2012).

One area that is worthy of further research is a closer analysis of the relationship between regional players, and specifically in reference to the alliances and partnerships Televisa is establishing around the format trade with independent producers in Argentina, and other countries in the secondary tier of exporting countries in Latin America (Sinclair & Straubhaar, 2013) As Piñón (2011) has accurately observed, Mexican producers frequently serve as cultural intermediaries (Negus, 2002) for certain business segments of the U.S. market within a new complex television landscape. However, as Argentina's independent production sector continues to grow, its status as an exporter of creative talent and production services may continue to shift in important ways, so it will be interesting to observe how this power dynamic unfolds. It remains to be seen whether Argentina can leverage its intellectual property around a full range of media content in the multi-channel transition (Lotz, 2007). These issues are all important to understanding the power of transnational actors and the enduring role of national media policy in an increasingly globalized world.

Chapter 3: The Adaptation of *Mujeres Asesinas* in Mexico

This chapter explores the production of *Mujeres Asesinas* in Mexico, as the television format adaptation of a popular fiction series from Argentina. *Mujeres Asesinas* has been called one of the most widely acclaimed television series in Mexico, where it enjoyed a successful run on weekly late night television from 2008 to 2010, before traveling to the U.S., where it was broadcast on Univisión between 2009 and 2011. The reality-based fiction television series was the first for Mediamates, an independent media production company that has specialized in advertising and marketing. The adaptation was among the earliest commercial successes for Televisa in non-*telenovela* fiction series (Cuajero, 2011).

The chapter begins by reviewing a history of the Mexican audiovisual space in order to contextualize media production in relation to local forces and broader regional and global trends, including Spanish-language media in the U.S. Next, a brief introduction to Televisa, its significance as a global media player, is offered as provided as a way to situate independent television production in efforts to seek new markets, new formats and new business models (Galperín, 2002; Mastrini, 2011).

That is followed by an introduction to Pedro Torres and his company, Mediamates. Next, a brief introduction to television format industry practices and trends in Mexico is provided as a way to contextualize the production of *Mujeres Asesinas*. Finally, a detailed analysis of the production of *Mujeres Asesinas* as a culturally-hybrid

text, provides insight into the industry's complex production, promotion and distribution relationships, practices and dynamics. These are analyzed against the backdrop of current social "struggles" in Mexico, in order to provide a nuanced view of the interplay of structural, material and discursive forces in one particular cultural text, that of *Mujeres Asesinas*.

BACKGROUND: THE MEXICAN AUDIOVISUAL CONTEXT

In Mexico, television operates within a largely privatized commercial media space. Its history, like the histories of so many other Latin American countries, has been characterized by a symbiotic relationship between government and the private sector. This has led some authors to question the dynamic in relation to democracy (Sanchez Ruiz, 2005) and debate the degree of agency powerful industrial groups have to operate without interference from the government (Paxman, 2001; Sinclair & Straubhaar, 2013). Nonetheless, this state of affairs has led to a predominantly commercial media market model⁴³ that has relied on monopolistic practices, with Grupo Televisa and, to lesser degree, TV Azteca controlling the broadcast television markets, and TelMex/Telcel controlling the telecommunications sector⁴⁴.

The television landscape in Mexico followed a pattern of concentration of media ownership that is not uncommon in Latin America, where familial structures with strong

⁴³ At one point Mexico did have two state-owned commercial networks that provided weak competition to the commercial channels (Sinclair & Straubhaar, 2013).

⁴⁴ Televisa and TV Azteca control 94 percent of signals on open television. Telmex controls 80 percent of fixed telephony and Telcel controls of mobile telephony. These last two control 61 percent of the Internet market. (OBITEL, 2014, p. 348)

patriarchal figures dominated their domestic media markets (Sinclair, 1999). Until 1994, when the most recent concession for open television was granted to TV Azteca, the television landscape in Mexico was controlled by one company: Grupo Televisa ("Competition Issues in Television and Broadcasting: Contribution from Mexico," 2013). The private audiovisual conglomerate has enjoyed several comparative advantages over the course of its development as an international powerhouse. These have included direct access to the largest nation of Spanish-speakers in the world, geographic proximity to other significant markets for Spanish-language media (the U.S. and Central and South America) and a 'cultural proximity' to a greater number of countries that share a similar cultural orientation, such as Spain and Brazil (McAnany & Wilkinson, 1984; J. D. Straubhaar, 1991).

Televisa has its origins in a radio broadcasting company that was founded in the 1930's by Emilio Azcarraga Vidarrueta. With the support of the ruling political party, PRI (in power from 1929 to 1997), Azcarraga was able to set up chains of radio and television stations that not only helped reinforce the PRI's hold on the government in both direct and indirect ways, but that also made it possible to take advantage of virtually unrestricted use of the airwaves (Paxman, 2001). His company also benefited from regulation that inhibited competition and encouraged its first international ventures (Lawson, 2002, in K. a. A. M. S. Wilkinson, 2013, p. 21). Much of the company's growth in the early years was made possible through partnerships with North American companies such as NBC and CBS, who were interested in capitalizing on U.S. national advertiser's interest in Latin America post World War II (Paxman, 2001). These ventures

were successful thanks, in part, to the company's ability to produce content that reflected local culture, and Azcarraga's foresight and entrepreneurial drive, which led him to implement programming exchanges with other entrepreneurs who were active in the region, such as Goar Mestre in Cuba (J. D. Straubhaar, 2012).

The first television concession in Mexico did not go to Azcarraga though; it went to an entrepreneur by the name of Romulo O'Farrill, who formed Television de Mexico in 1942. Azcarraga ventured into television in 1951, with the second concession, and the third concession went to President Miguel Alemán Valdez's family. All three merged into what became Telesistema Mexicano in 1955. This partnership eventually led to business incursions into Latin American markets and into the U.S. under a series of arrangements (some of which generated a dispute with the Federal Communications Commission over a violation of foreign-ownership rules) (Sinclair & Straubhaar, 2013). (A. Rodríguez, 1997).

The formal establishment of Televisa, as such, happened in 1972, bringing together the three powerful industrial groups in Mexico (O'Farrill's Grupo Puebla, Grupo Alemán and Azcarraga's group) in an effort to rally against the government's efforts to exert some measure of control over the industry and the market (Sinclair & Straubhaar, 2013). It was during this time that the Azcarraga family took complete control of Televisa, under the leadership of Emilio Azcarraga Milmo ("El Tigre"), following the death of his father, Emilio Azcarraga Vidarrueta. This ushered in what has been referred to as 'the golden age' of Televisa -- the 1970s. The company produced 60 to 90% of its programming (leading with *telenovelas* and variety shows), developed its own star

system, and enjoyed almost complete control of the domestic market, with a 93% share (Sinclair & Straubhaar, 2013, p. 40). Domestic production and distribution were all but controlled by Televisa, thanks to the vertical and horizontal integration of its business.

The next big push for Televisa would be its international expansion. The company began exploring ways to extend its programming distribution activity to the U.S. and Spain (beyond the sale of canned programs), and ventured into satellite transmission during the 1970s. Through the establishment of Univisión in 1976, Televisa began transmitting a weekly feed of its programs to the U.S. border, which was then transmitted to its other U.S. stations via satellite (Sinclair, 1999, p. 40). Through its various investments North of the border, and its satellite-to-cable operation, Galavision, Televisa virtually owned, financed and operated U.S. Spanish language television (A. Rodríguez, 1997).

During the 1980's, Televisa was forced to make changes to its business practices in the U.S. as well as at home. North of the border, an inquiry from the FCC threatened to shut down some of its operations. In response, Azcarraga sold the U.S. chain of stations to Hallmark, and reorganized its network, per se, under Univisión, which would also ultimately be sold to Hallmark a short time later. In Mexico, Televisa was confronted by a new ruling put in place by then president Miguel de la Madrid, that placed the development of domestic satellite operations firmly in hands of the Mexican government (Sinclair & Straubhaar, 2013). Televisa responded by establishing an international satellite service based in the U.S. (PanAmSat) that included coverage in the U.S., Latin America and parts of Europe (p.40) as a way to sidestep the limitations placed on the

company by the government. However, as the company was growing its international presence, it also experienced some serious missteps, mostly associated with the establishment of an international news service (ECO) that led to financial losses and a crisis of credibility. The company's publicly acknowledged support for the PRI under the growing popularity of an opposing political party, the PAN (Partido Acción Nacional), and its questionable handling of political news events ultimately became a liability that negatively impacted its bottom line when combined with some other various business missteps in the U.S. that also led to financial loss (Sinclair & Straubhaar, 2013, p. 44).

The company was restructured in 1991 under a move that culminated in the exit of the Alemán and O'Farrill families, which left Azcarraga free to take the company public, with offerings on the Mexican and NY stock markets, in 1992. For Televisa, this translated into foreign investment through the stock market, without giving investors voting rights (J. Piñón, 2014). This helped Televisa purchase a stake in Univisión, under a partnership with a U.S. owner and another Latin American network, Venevisión, in 1992, and a programming licensing agreement (PLA) was set up to guarantee the flow of content from Televisa and Venevisión to Univisión for a period of 15 years (Ibid).

With the rise of new telecommunication technology and a wave of international media deregulation during the 1990's, the Mexican audiovisual space shifted as the country embraced the tenets of market liberalization and privatization. The arrival of a second television broadcaster, TV Azteca, during the government of Salinas de Gortari (1988-1994) signaled the end of Televisa's uncontested domination of the domestic market. The new broadcaster (later privatized to a single player, Ricardo Salinas) adopted

many of Televisa's practices and strategies and was able to attract a portion of the domestic audience on open television and carve out a portion of the country's total advertising spending fairly quickly. The decade proved to be a turbulent time for Televisa, as the company navigated a series of business deals related to its international expansion in Latin America, adjusted to economic upheaval at home following a currency devaluation in 1994, and reeled from the death of Emilio Azcarraga Milmo in 1997 (Sinclair & Straubhaar, 2013).

After considerable internal turmoil that involved a crisis of leadership and reshuffling to appease potential concerns of stock market investors, Televisa turned its focus on strengthening the production of content, and the reach of its domestic distribution network in the face of competition from TV Azteca and from others in the cable television field. Through increased investment in PanAmSat and Sky, and through strategic alliances with News Corporation, Organizações Globo, and TCI, Televisa invested heavily in digital satellite technology (DTH), and forged important pan regional distribution deals in the face of competition for Cablevisión (its cable provider) from another Mexican cable company at home (Multivisión) that was actively pursuing similar deals. These types of partnerships around DTH were encouraged by the Mexican government following a deal with the U.S. government that allowed for cross-border satellite signal transmission (Sinclair & Straubhaar, 2013).

During the 2000's, Mexican media companies were involved in a realignment of sorts within the U.S. Spanish-language space. The launch of Azteca America in the U.S. provided a window for TV Azteca programming, and Telemundo found a new co-

production partner in Argos, a Mexican independent producer of *telenovelas* and other fiction programming, that provided much of TV Azteca's early hits. As Piñón (2014) has pointed out, the competition extended beyond Mexico/U.S. borders, and as U.S. players ventured into other Latin American countries they established a variety of new business relationships that Piñón calls "cross-border circuits of exhibition." This generated not only new alliances, but also new rivalries around program/production and branding differentiation.

Slightly before Univisión's sale in 2006, Televisa initiated legal action against the company for "breach of contract" related to programming rights and under payment of over 100 million dollars in royalties (IberoAmerican Observatory on Television Fiction, 2009). Televisa was seeking to alter the terms of the PLA between Univisión and Televisa, which restricted Televisa from producing Spanish-language content for other companies in the U.S. In fact, Televisa was actively pitching its format business and co-production options with other players in the English-language space who were turning their attention to the growing U.S. Hispanic audience (Littleton, 2014; Phelps, 2012). The dispute was settled in 2008, to Televisa's benefit, both from a financial standpoint and from a programming standpoint. Televisa was then able to negotiate an agreement with Telemundo for the exchange of programming (IberoAmerican Observatory on Television Fiction, 2009).

The privatization of Mexico's telecommunications carrier, TelMex, combined with the advent of convergent technologies sparked tensions around control of new forms of distribution (Sosa-Plata, 2011). These tensions escalated around two rival groups:

Telmex, owned by Carlos Slim – reportedly the wealthiest man in the world—and Televisa and TV Azteca, who found it advantageous to band together against Slim, based on their ability to offer triple-play services (TV, internet and phone) -- an option that was not available to Telmex based on its licensing status.

A questionable form of deregulation followed in 2006, whereby licenses to the digital spectrum were made available to others by virtue of an auction, but Televisa and TV Azteca were grandfathered in with free access (Sinclair & Straubhaar, 2013). “The Ley Televisa” as it was later referred to, was struck down in 2007, and although it did not impact the telecomm market, it did set a precedent for trying to prevent interference from telecommunication companies in the political process (Madrazo, 2013). It also paved the way for the emergence of a third broadcast network in Mexico, Cadena Tres, under the ownership of Grupo Empresarial Angeles (Orozco, Hernandez, Franco, & Charlois, 2012).

Recognizing that the biggest growth market for Televisa in its global expansion efforts was (and is still) the U.S., “the world’s richest Hispanics” (Sinclair 1999). Televisa re-entered the U.S. market by purchasing shares in Univision in 2010. This was possible thanks to a loophole in U.S. legislation that does not consider network corporations (content producers) subject to the same legislation on foreign ownership limitations that impact broadcast station licensees and owners of broadcasting infrastructure (J. Piñón, 2014). This move coincided with Univisión’s expressed commitment to the digital and mobile space (under Univisión Interactive), which saw the

addition of a new *Novelas y Series* channel (online and mobile streaming) and new business relationships with YouTube, iTunes and Blackberry (Ibid).

In 2011, under the government of Felipe Calderón (PAN), important new anti-monopoly regulation reforms that govern the broadcasting and telecommunications industries were outlined in the Federal Telecommunications Law (*Ley Federal de Telecomunicaciones*).⁴⁵ The reforms were designed to boost competition in the phone and television industries⁴⁶ by imposing fines for monopolistic practices and prison terms for executives found in violation of the law. The law, which has not been enforced, also made it possible for Telmex to enter the television market (Malkin, 2011b).

The creation of a new Federal Telecommunications Institute (IFT) in 2013, under the government of Enrique Peña Nieto (of the PRI party), has already begun to change the landscape of television in Mexico by reasserting the government's ability to limit media monopolies. In 2014, the IFT authorized the launch of two new national free-to-air broadcast networks in Mexico that will begin operating in 2015 (Hopewell, 2014). This, and a new State-owned television network⁴⁷, combined with the growth of a variety of

⁴⁵ As the law was written, it covered 1) access to the radio electric spectrum in order to transmit a TV signal, which is granted by the government; 2) Limits on foreign investment in pay television and prohibition of foreign ownership in national open television and radio companies; and 3) stipulations on content, related to language and national culture on open television ("Competition Issues in Television and Broadcasting: Contribution from Mexico," 2013).

⁴⁶ Telecomm is mostly under the control of Carlos Slim's companies. The company controls 80 percent of Mexico's landlines through Telmex, its subsidiary, and 70 percent of the wireless market through Telcel. The Internet space is also largely dominated by Telmex, or local cable subsidiaries of Televisa (Malkin, 2011b).

⁴⁷ Two other State-run television networks, Once TV and Channel 22 commanded less than 2 percent of the national audience in 2009. (Sosa-Plata, 2011)

online platforms will guarantee that the Mexican audiovisual market, structure and dynamics will continue to be in a high state of flux for the foreseeable future.

TELEVISA: BRIEF OVERVIEW

Televisa is the largest media conglomerate in the Spanish-speaking world, a significant player in the global television market, and the dominant media player in Mexico, where it holds a 64.3 share of the broadcast television market. The core of Grupo Televisa's business is broadcast television, but the company owns operations in cable television, satellite television, film production and distribution, radio, international licensing, publishing, gaming, and a variety of other businesses including online ventures and telecommunications ("Grupo Televisa Transformational - 2013 Annual Report," 2014). Televisa's operations are integrated vertically, through control of content production and various distribution channels, and integrated horizontally, through control of a number of other media properties (see Figure 2).

Televisa operates four broadcasting channels – 2, 4, 5 and 9— in Mexico City and broadcasts its content through over 200 affiliated stations throughout the country. These four channels provide the Group's main source of content revenue through advertising,⁴⁸ which represents 73.5 percent of the total revenue for the Group (Ibid, p. 14).

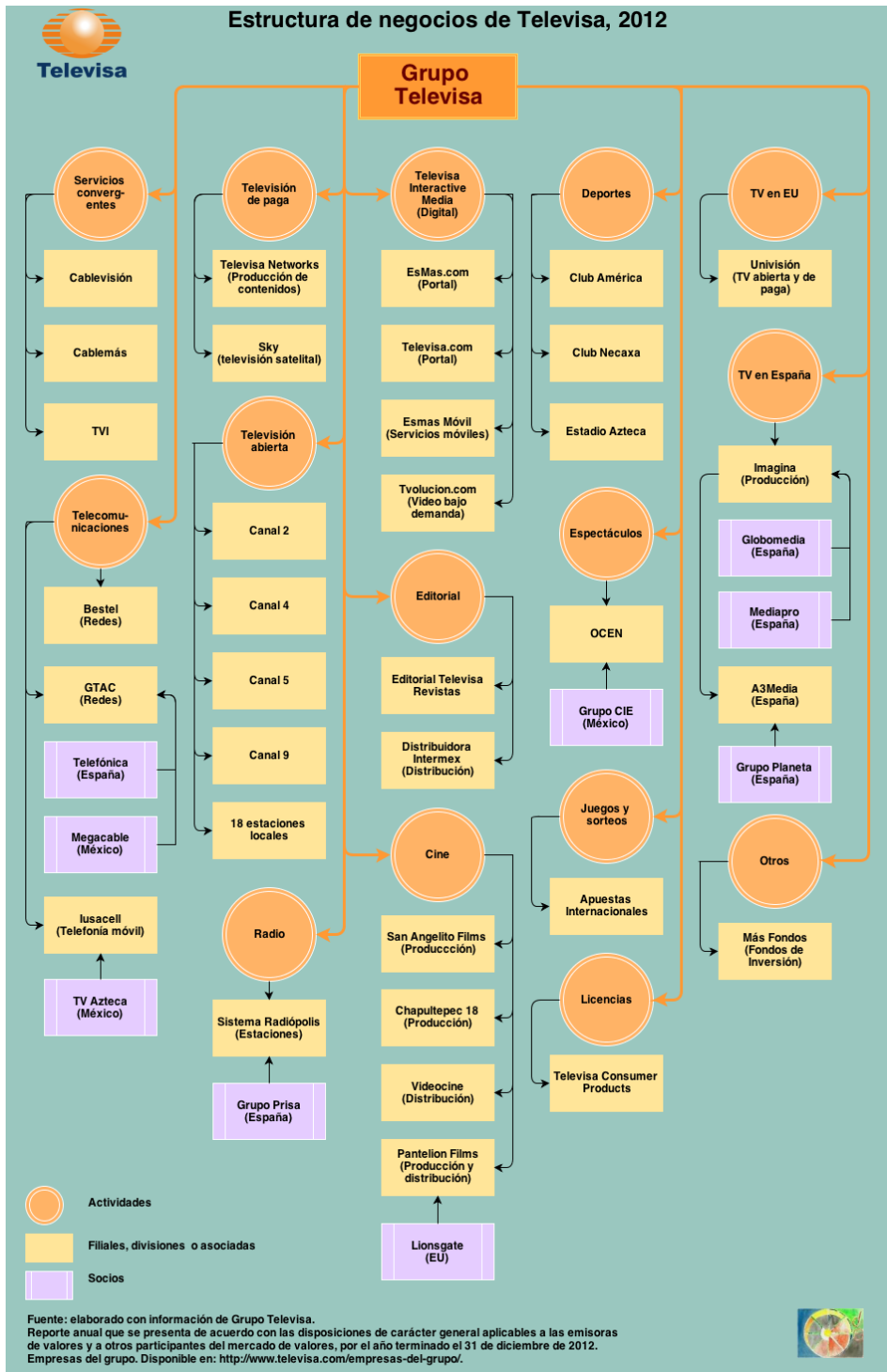


Figure 2. Grupo Televisa's Business Structure (Bonifaz, 2013)

Televisa's portfolio of pay TV channels and close to 50 feeds are available worldwide. Televisa's content is distributed to over 70 countries and reaches an estimated 37 million households. Sky, the DTH operation Televisa owns with News Corp., has over 6 million pay-TV subscribers across 200 pay-tv networks, two-thirds of whom were gained recently when the company broadened its business strategy from a focus on 'high-end' segments of the market to a focus on reaching all segments of the market ("Grupo Televisa Transformational - 2013 Annual Report," 2014).

Over the last six years, Televisa has invested \$5 billion in telecommunications, preparing to expand its activities in this area (Ibid). Televisa Interactive Media (TIM) provides access to text image, audio and video content to more than 24 million viewers throughout the Spanish-speaking world (Televisa, 2009a). Televisa reported investing in state-of-the-art technology that enables broadband users with low broadband speeds to view high quality streaming video and positioned itself to provide exclusive content to 200 million mobile users in Latin America (p.18). Its site, esmas.com, is billed as the 'leading digital entertainment portal in Latin America,' with pay services that include streaming and downloadable content (both domestic and foreign content). Televisa's free online streaming service is TVolución (www.tvolucion.com), which features Televisa television and films exclusively (Bastida, 2009).⁴⁹

Finally, it is important to note that although Grupo Televisa has focused on Spanish-language media and content, the company is now venturing into producing

⁴⁹ When *Mujeres Asesinas* was released in 2008, Televisa had digital streaming capability but TVAzteca had yet to launch the service (Bastida, 2009).

content other languages. In 2013, Grupo Televisa reported producing content in three languages through various ‘collaboration’ partnerships with companies in the United States, China, France, Brazil, Colombia and Argentina ("Grupo Televisa Transformational - 2013 Annual Report," 2014, p. 18).

THE TELEVISION FORMAT INDUSTRY IN MEXICO

The television format trend in Mexico seems to have begun during the 1990s,⁵⁰ but didn't really take hold of the local industry until around 2007. A steady trend of replacing *telenovelas* and other television fiction that originated in Mexico with imported scripts and television formats slowly preceded two key events that marked a commitment to the form in 2007. The first was the creation of a special division within Televisa dedicated to the production of series, as a way to begin experimenting with non-*telenovela* genres (IberoAmerican Observatory on Television Fiction, 2008, p. 338).⁵¹ The second was the renewal of a close production relationship between Argos Comunicación, an independent production company in Mexico, and TV Azteca, which had soured a few years earlier (IberoAmerican Observatory on Television Fiction, 2008).⁵² Argos would be instrumental to TV Azteca's commitment to increase its output in *telenovelas* and other series through television adaptations.

⁵⁰ Juan Piñón (2007), explained the rise of remakes during the 1990s as a byproduct of the wave of privatization and liberalization that swept the world, the introduction of new regional channels, which created a need for more content, and advent of new communication and production technologies (p. 130).

⁵¹ As one of the two largest fiction-exporting countries in Latin America (Mexico and Brazil), it is interesting to note that 50% of Mexico's television scripts are from foreign authors (IberoAmerican Observatory on Television Fiction, 2008).

⁵² During the time that the relationship between TV Azteca and Argos was strained, Argos went on to work closely with Telemundo in the U.S. (IberoAmerican Observatory on Television Fiction, 2008). f

The local format adaptation practice, exemplified by the work of these two companies, Televisa and TV Azteca, has relied mainly on importing scripts from the U.S., Colombia, Venezuela and Argentina, and adapting them for a domestic audience. Mexico was not alone in forging trade relationships and alliances around the television format business in Latin America; traditional US media players were also venturing South in an effort to capitalize on the growing U.S. domestic Latino audience (IberoAmerican Observatory on Television Fiction, 2008, p. 52). Companies such as Walt-Disney/ABC, News Corporation and General Electric NBC were all developing *telenovelas* and series with partners in Latin America in 2007 and 2008 (Obitel 2009, p.311). These relationships have taken a variety of forms, from co-productions, adaptations, and first-look deals to outsourcing exercises where entire casts are transferred to the production location in an effort to control costs (J. Miller, 2010).

Many of these opportunities and alliances are still very much in flux, but there are signs that the Mexican government has jump-started a specialized media trade initiative through Pro-México (a subdivision of the Secretariat of Economy, and the organism in charge of promoting international trade and investment)⁵³. In 2014, the annual international television industry market held in Cannes, MIPCOM, featured Mexico as the “Country of Honor.” In contrast to the previous year, when only 13 companies participated, including Televisa and TV Azteca (Notimex, 2014), this market featured the participation of 124 Mexican companies that provide various film, television and

⁵³ It is interesting to note that Mexico is the second Latin American country to be invited as the “Guest of Honor” at MIPCOM, following Argentina.

production services (MipMarkets, 2014). A MIPCOM 2014 panel entitled “Mexico Megasseion: The Quest for Original Content” was designed to briefly introduce some of the key players in the industry, showcase Mexico’s production expertise and invite attendees to explore business opportunities during the market. The panelists included representatives from TV Azteca, Discovery Communications, Endemol Latino⁵⁴, Argos Comunicación and El Mall (Ibid). The discourse revolved mainly around the availability of diverse talent and a focus on ‘quality,’ as well as repeated invitations to engage with Mexican companies during the market. It is interesting to note that both of the independent production companies that were represented on this panel, Argos Comunicación and El Mall are private Mexican companies, owned by individuals who have held close business relationships with TV Azteca and Televisa. Epigmenio Ibarra, who owns Argos Comunicación, was hired by Salinas Pliego to develop *telenovelas* for TV Azteca that could compete with Televisa (Stavans, 2010, p. 105) and Pedro Torres worked for Televisa before starting his own company, Pedro Torres y Asociados, which later became The Mates, and is now El Mall.

Several characteristics are emblematic of the prevalent format television industry in Mexico in recent years: First, the push to identify *telenovelas*, series and other properties with great entertainment branding potential; changes in the nature of regional partnerships; and interest in developing formats with potential for multiple distribution windows.

⁵⁴ Endemol Latino is based in Miami, but the company is reportedly “trying to” set up an office in Mexico City, where they are planning to produce another iteration of *Big Brother*. (MipMarkets, 2014). Various news items have made mention of the possibility that Endemol may buy a Mexican production house.

The Push to Identify Series with Entertainment Branding Potential

Mexico has successfully adapted scripts from its South American counterparts for some time. Mexico is also the biggest consumer of Argentinian formats (LatAm, 2013). Many of these adaptations of foreign series first find their way to Mexico as canned products on cable television, which has some bearing on their potential for success as adaptations. The Mexican television industry has embraced a pattern of multiple remakes for successful products, such as *Café con Aroma de Mujer*, a Colombian *telenovela* that found its way to the small screen four times in thirteen years . In many cases, Mexican producers have transformed *telenovelas* and series into branding properties that surpass the success some of these already highly successful series enjoyed in their home markets, as was the case with Televisa's *La fea mas bella*, a remake of *Betty la Fea* (Colombia) (Ibid).

Some series, such as *Rebelde* (Rebel), a remake of *Rebelde Way*, an Argentinian series produced by Cris Morena, became a commercial hit in Mexico (2004-2006). It catapulted five actors from the series, and their pop music band, to international fame, and facilitating the strategic merchandising of a wide range of ancillary products that surpassed the success of the series.

In contrast, *Lola, Erase una Vez* (2007-2008), a Televisa remake of another Cris Morena product, *La Lola*, was a failure in Mexico. *La Lola* is a dramedy that focuses on the story of a man who wakes up as a woman, thanks to a curse orchestrated by an ex-lover who wants him to feel what it is like to inhabit the body of a woman and be the object of sexual harassment. Prior to the launch of the adaptation, the original series had

been broadcast on the Disney channel in Mexico, and the lead actress, an Argentinian by the name of Florencia Bertotti, already enjoyed some familiarity with a more affluent subset of the Mexican audience. Although the adaptation was produced with an eye on branding the series' musical talent and merchandise, the show was not well received, and was cancelled within one year. One can only speculate as to the reasons, but this proves that there is no set formula for success (IberoAmerican Observatory on Television Fiction, 2008).

Changes in the Nature of Regional Partnerships

First-look deals for content are becoming more common, not only for television content, but with an eye toward extending properties into the digital arena. "First-look deals" are defined as non-exclusive arrangements made between a producer and a potential buyer, which extend the right of first-refusal on any project developed or acquired by the producer (Chad, 2013). Companies in the international television space are increasingly looking to replicate this model rather than acquire equity stakes in local companies ("Original and Online," 2008). Limited information is made available about financial and transactional details of the agreements associated with first-look agreements, co-productions and adaptations, so it is somewhat difficult to assess the implications.

What is certain is that Televisa has wielded its power on a regional basis to try to control the export market for Spanish-language television for some time, and this state of affairs has been complicated by the arrival of new players and distribution windows. For example, in 2008, Televisa and Sony Pictures Television signed a first-look co-

production deal for scripted and unscripted formats worldwide with the exception of the U.S. and Latin America (Hecht, 2012). For Televisa, the deal provided access to potential co-productions for the Spanish market in Europe, with an investment stake in media properties. The initial co-production following this agreement was for *Los Simuladores* (The Pretenders), which marked the first time that Sony Pictures Television produced a scripted format for Televisa. More importantly, *Los Simuladores* was an adaptation of an Argentinian series developed by Telefé. There are more questions than answers surrounding licensing and distribution rights for television formats purchased by Televisa because the details of these business deals are rarely made public. This particular instance would suggest that by holding the distribution rights for the Argentinian format, Televisa was effectively limiting Telefé's ability to negotiate a co-production deal directly with Sony Pictures Television for the Spanish market, and perhaps for any other market outside of the Latin American region.

One industry report published in 2008 mentioned that international distribution and format sales conflicts had arisen between Televisa and several independent producers in Argentina (Cris Morena Group and RGB Entertainment) after entering three-year partnerships (Televisa had similar arrangements with Ideas del Sur and Producciones Polka). The terms of these arrangements were modified as a result of these conflicts. Televisa went from co-producing, distributing scripted series internationally and working on the development of ancillary revenue streams (Newbery, 2008b) to investing directly in production, handling international sales and 'working with Argentinian companies on remakes in other territories' (Newbery, 2008c). Argentina was part of 6 co-productions in

2008, none of which were with Mexico (IberoAmerican Observatory on Television Fiction, 2009, p. 27).⁵⁵

It is important to recognize that Televisa's incursion into Argentina to work with local production houses has influenced the dynamics around technology in the sector (Barbadori, 2012). These partnerships have provided an injection of capital that has helped finance investments in technology and impact the ability of Argentinian producers to place products in foreign markets. For Televisa, the partnerships with Argentinian producers expanded its library of content following its incursion into Asia, where it opened offices in Shanghai and Beijing, and in preparation for its expansion into India, Indonesia, Japan, Russia and South Korea (Newbery, 2008c). They also helped the company diversify its content, beyond the *telenovelas* it is known for⁵⁶ (Newbery, 2008c). Argentinian producers have expressed concern in the past over the implications of Televisa's power over their scripts. One individual felt that Televisa was purchasing a library of scripts and products that would never be commercialized (Barbadori, 2012, p. 87).

An Eye on Multiple Windows of Distribution

The focus on multiple windows of distribution is tied to the roll out of terrestrial digital television (TDT) across Latin America and "triple play" bundling (television, telephony and broadband Internet) services. Although terrestrial television remains

⁵⁵ The co-production deals were with the U.S. (3), Spain (2) and Brazil (1). This suggests that Spain is an important market for Argentinian producers, who can negotiate their deals with clients in that country directly.

⁵⁶ One of Televisa's corporate vice presidents recognized that the company was aware of its limitations and were looking for content to fill in where Televisa was weak – exactly the type of content developed by Argentinian independent producers (Ibid).

strong, cable and satellite television are growing steadily. Non-terrestrial platforms accounted for almost a third of all households in Mexico in 2009, and although internet subscription rates remained low (10% of all households), over 80 percent of Mexicans owned a mobile phone subscription that same year (Sosa-Plata, 2011). Recent battles over telecommunications in Mexico suggest that this is an area that is poised for significant growth, and advertisers have already begun to shift portions of their domestic budgets toward mobile and online opportunities. This is an arena where new independent producers may be well positioned to enter the market, however, at least initially, they may likely become purveyors of media production services to global and regional players (J. Miller, 2010). Lopes and Orozco have observed a steady pattern of growth in transmedia use and production in Latin America between 2009 and 2013 but classify Mexico's development on that front on as "intermediate" level, suggesting that there is room for growth and improvement (OBITEL, 2014).

Much of this is still working itself out, and a few failed cases have cast doubts in some circles as to whether (foreign) investment opportunities will follow in Latin America. For example, Warner Latin America, a pan regional online streaming channel failed in 2008, based on the lack of advertisers who could "support the cost of streaming" and "complications arising from licensing" which hasn't been fully developed (Bastida, 2009).

PEDRO TORRES AND MEDIAMATES

Mujeres Asesinas marked the first fiction series for Pedro Torres, whose career in television was built on reality television. Torres was the first to import reality television

to Mexico, in his role as General Manager of Endemol in that country. Before *Mujeres Asesinas*, his name was most often associated with *Big Brother Mexico*, the first series produced under a Televisa/Endemol joint venture, based on the international format first produced in the Netherlands.⁵⁷ *Big Brother Mexico* (2002-2008) turned out to be the first in a series of reality shows that achieved consistently high ratings on Televisa. Over a six-year period, other reality shows produced by Torres included *Big Brother VIP*, *Fear Factor*, *Taxi Cash*, *Operación Triunfo*, *Vas o no vas* and *El bar provoca*.⁵⁸

Torres began his career as a camera operator, working on the campaign of former president Manuel Lopez Obrador during the 1970s. His company, The Mates, was first launched as an advertising agency in Mexico City, under the name Pedro Torres y Asociados. The company billed itself as a ‘creator of new content and formats for television and digital entertainment media’ producing series, game shows, reality shows, ‘advertainment’ and political marketing (ProMexico, 2014). Torres studied film at the London Film School, but has pronounced himself “100 percent a publicist.” His career includes credits for over 100 documentaries, 3000 commercials and popular music videos (Tavira, 2009). He is also considered an early adopter of advanced digital media technology.

A common misperception circulates about Pedro Torres: many people think he works for Televisa. During an interview at MIPCOM, Torres was quick to deny that

⁵⁷ The *Big Brother* reality television franchise is among the most notable worldwide, boasting a combined global viewership of 740 million, and an estimated \$10 billion in profits over a 15-year period (Albert Moran & Aveyard, 2014).

⁵⁸ Endemol Mexico is a 50:50 joint venture with Televisa. Televisa bankrolled the Mexican version of *Big Brother* for a substantial sum over 5 years, and in the process obtained first option on all programs and formats in Endemol’s catalog (Waller, 2001).

rumor, and described his relationship with Televisa as “a very long relationship based on loyalty and mutual benefit” (“Cuando pegas un hit en Televisa el mundo te voltea a ver,” 2012). He shares television credits for a number of important Televisa hits, but his name has also been tied to a media scandal (2005-2012) surrounding the political campaigns of Enrique Peña Nieto, during his rise to the governorship of the State of Mexico, and later to the presidency of Mexico. The accusations maintain that a ‘secret unit’ within Televisa was reportedly set up to manage and fund the political campaigns, including defamation campaigns against his rivals. Torres’ company was identified as an external contractor that was presumably bound by confidentiality agreements. Televisa has denied the allegations (Tuckman, 2012).

Following the success of *Mujeres Asesinas*, Torres rebranded the company as a media consortium and content shop in 2011, under a new corporate structure and a new name: ‘El Mall,’ (www.elmall.mx). The company moved into a state-of-the-art facility in Mexico City, designed to incorporate television production, advertising production, scriptwriting, photography, publishing, corporate and musical events, live events, and more. Torres explained the impetus for the evolution as what he viewed as a shift in the advertising industry, which was designating greater portions of their “below-the-line” budgets to online content. By rebranding as ‘El Mall,’ Torres felt his company would be in a better position to focus primarily on digital content and social media activities, including the production of Webseries, which were an area of interest (“Pedro Torres muestra las instalaciones de su nueva productora el mall con un moderno concepto de social media and content shops,” 2012)...

Antonio León de la Barra, Torres' Chief Marketing Officer in 2010, was hired to help manage a brand transition from The Mates to El Mall. León was involved not only repositioning the company to reflect its new corporate structure and status, but also led a "brand migration process" to encourage the transition from The Mates brand to Pedro Torres' name (as a temporary transfer brand), to El Mall as a new brand. For a time, *Mujeres Asesinas* intros and promotional materials carried his name rather than his company name ("Pedro Torres presents" rather than using "The Mates," or "Mediamates," which is the division dedicated to television production) or El Mall.

De la Barra explained the rationale behind the rebranding project as follows: "Pedro is an icon in Mexico, but his name was associated with the 'Baby Boomer' generation, so the new generation of younger creative professionals, millennials working in advertising and other creative fields, were overlooking him. They associated his name with his earlier video work, but were not thinking of him as a resource in the advertising space" (Leon de la Barra, 2014).

This strategy, at least on the surface, would appear to be a move designed to revitalize the company's advertising division around developing opportunities in the digital content and social media space.

THE ADAPTATION OF *MUJERES ASESINAS* IN MEXICO

The Mexican adaptation of *Mujeres Asesinas* was the brainchild of Mexican marketer and producer Pedro Torres, whose company at the time, Mediamates Group, specialized in advertising and entertainment production for television and digital platforms. Encouraged by his earlier success with the Mexican remake of the international reality series, *Big Brother* (a joint Televisa-Endemol property in Mexico), Torres traveled to MIPCOM in search of other options in 2007, and followed up with a

visit to Producciones Pol-ka in Argentina, where he secured the rights for the series at a reported cost of \$15,000 per episode. That cost included rights to the script, as well as distribution rights for Mexico and the United States (Tavira, 2009).⁵⁹

Upon consolidating the purchase, Torres offered *Mujeres Asesinas* to Televisa,⁶⁰ and began to produce a pilot at their request (he invested his own company's funds in the pilot and in pre-production). Initially, Televisa rejected the project based on the proposed cost per episode, which was calculated as \$300,000 -- three times the average production cost of a *telenovela* (Tavira, 2009). This led to the development of a funding model that combined co-financing and pre-sales in order to secure the estimated 4.3 million dollars required for the production. The funding would cover the cost of production of 13 episodes and an elaborate marketing/pre-publicity campaign, a move that was considered a departure from standard industry practice.

After some effort, Torres was able to put together a 3-year co-financing/pre-sales partnership that included: Televisa, with a 35 percent stake for the open television rights in Mexico; Univisión, with a 30 percent stake for the U.S. rights; TVC (a cable television shopping channel) with a 25 percent stake; and Sony⁶¹, with a 10 percent stake that would guarantee the rights for distribution on a regional television channel (Proceso, 2008). TVC was the last to invest, obtaining the first window rights in Mexico (Balassa, 2014).

⁵⁹ Before launching Mediamates Group in Mexico, Torres spent 6 years working for Endemol, the largest and most successful television format producer and distributor in the world (Moran, 2006, p.13). He holds a graduate degree from the London Film School.

⁶⁰ Prior to finalizing the deal with Televisa, Torres was reportedly negotiating with both Univision and Telemundo for distribution rights in the U.S. (PRODU, 2007a).

⁶¹ Torres and Balassa approached Sergio Pizzolante who was the General Director of Sony at the time, and is now at E! Entertainment Television.

Each of the partners provided an advance to help get the project off the ground (Ibid). Partners did not participate in the creative process, but they did, at times, make suggestions related to the selection of lead actresses (a decision they felt could impact the bottom line) or helped negotiate details related to promotion/advertising opportunities (Balassa, 2014). Televisa was most interested in ensuring that their acting talent was included as often as possible, because casting decisions were controlled by Mediamates (in some cases Mediamates did select non-Televisa talent). Univisión's interest was mainly related to the order of appearance of the actresses, as some would be much more familiar to the U.S. audience than others. The broadcaster wanted the flexibility to be able to air episodes in a different release order to accommodate those preferences ⁶² (Ibid).

It is important to pause at this point to consider the business arrangements described for *Mujeres Asesinas* in relation to some of the definitions found in format television literature. According to Tim Havens (Timothy Havens, 2006), pre-sales and co-financing arrangements are similar to co-productions. However, there are differences. Co-productions “involve at least two partners from different nations who each take a creative role in producing a television program, typically with government financing from one or both partner nations.” In co-financing arrangements, financing partners don't usually have creative input. The final project is under the control of one producer who takes creative control for a project that is intended for a particular domestic market

⁶² This may have had an impact on the ability of Mediamates to fully develop a parallel storyline around the introduction of a new narrative element -- the DIEM police investigative unit.

(Timothy Havens, 2006, p. 36). Pre-sales arrangements involve “a single producer and multiple domestic and foreign buyers who provide money up front in order to secure program rights in particular markets” (Ibid).

The executives interviewed for this project were clear that this was not a co-production, and in fact, considered the project to be the creative domain of the local producer (almost to the detriment of the format originator). It is also interesting to consider this distinction in light of information contained in a *Fortune* article about Televisa’s format business in China:

...In 2006, (Televisa) started striking deals with local Chinese producers to develop original *telenovelas* in Mandarin for Chinese viewers. The company avoids using the phrase “co-production” — something the Chinese dislike because it takes attention away from local talent — so instead the partnerships are described as “collaborations” (Cendrowski, 2013).

Televisa’s annual report in 2008 describes the company’s activities in China and Argentina as ‘collaborations,’ whereas it describes its activities in Brazil as “co-productions” (Televisa, 2008, p. 11). Distinctions of this nature may be increasingly important to independent producers who are building a body of work and a brand of their own in a competitive international market. However, further research on this point will have more to reveal about relations of power in a global context.

Several factors facilitated the arrangements for *Mujeres Asesinas*: the series’ proven commercial success in Argentina; Torres’ close relationship with Televisa (which would help guarantee access to talent and potential sponsors); and his successful track record producing Endemol formats.

For the first time in the history of Mediamates, a special Board of Directors was

formed to oversee the financial and management aspects of the production⁶³. Members of the Board included Pedro Torres (CEO), a Chief Financial Officer, a Chief Operating Officer, a Chief Marketing Officer, and representatives from the financing partner firms (Leon de la Barra, 2014). Antonio Leon de la Barra, who was hired as the Chief Marketing Officer, explained that the absence of this type of oversight in the past led to a host of problems. The transition to working under this structure was not exactly smooth. De la Barra explained:

“Pedro’s creativity is unlimited. So, projects would cost more than what was projected. There were all sorts of problems that come about when art is monetized without a measure of control. Now there were multiple limits, controls and rules, and it was difficult (for us) because Pedro is not only the CEO, he is also the owner. So, to tell him that he can't do something is an issue in itself. But he handled it well. He realized that it was time to take the next step, and that part of the learning process was to listen to others every now and then, including those who disagreed with him” (Leon de la Barra, 2014).

Alex Balassa, who executive-produced 40 episodes of *Mujeres Asesinas*, was charged with leading the selection of episodes, along with a team of writers. The goal was to pare down the number of episodes from the 78 that were produced in Argentina, to 13 for the first season of the adaptation. Torres hired Mexican writer, Luis Felipe Ibarra, as head writer for Mediamates to coordinate the script adaptation process, mainly to ensure that there would be consistency across episodes, but eventually satirical writer, director, actor and singer Carlos Pascual took over, as he was able to work independently on the scripts (Balassa, 2014). The original team (Balassa, Ibarra and Pascual) poured

⁶³ This decision was made by recommendation of one of Pedro Torres’ business advisors and friends, Victor Bucardo, who is considered a marketing leader in Mexico, and who helped develop the new corporate structure (Leon de la Barra, 2014).

through the scripts, read the original book by Argentinian author Marisa Grinstein⁶⁴, reviewed the original cases, and watched some of the Argentinian episodes, to help make decisions about the selection process. Balassa explained that each of the team members proposed episodes during meetings, with the participation of Pedro Torres, and decisions were made through consensus (Ibid).

A ‘casting’ event was also held to select directors for the project; some names were put forth by Torres, others were recommended by Balassa (Balassa, 2014). Film and television director Mafer Suarez was tapped to work on the pilot, and Suarez suggested her first choices for lead actors in the episode. Torres and Balassa went to see the actors in a theater performance under the suggestion of Suárez, and invited them to try out for the parts (Alejandra Barros and Odiseo Bichir, both of whom starred in *Jessica Tóxica*) (Balassa, 2014). Finally, with input from the management team, thirteen well-known film and television actresses were selected for the lead roles (Marker, 2008).

Production began in January of 2008. Thirteen episodes of 40 minutes each were produced in high definition format and filmed on location in Mexico City, Toluca and Pachuca, under the direction of Mafer Suárez, Carlos García Agraz and Álvaro Curiel (SC, 2009).

Mujeres Asesinas made its debut on TVC, and later aired on Cablevisión (and Televisa’s other Mexican cable companies) on a weekly schedule from June 17 to August

⁶⁴ Marisa Grinstein was invited to travel to Mexico City to attend a “Mujeres Asesinas” press conference shortly after the first season launched. She appeared alongside Alex Balassa, Mediamates’ Executive Producer, and actress Damayanti Quintanar (“Narra Grinstein experiencias que dieron origen a 'Mujeres asesinas',” 2008).

3, 2008, in a Friday 10 PM time slot. The premiere, which featured Alejandra Barros as a housewife who poisons her husband to exit an unhappy marriage, broke records, by registering an impressive 17 rating/23 share (J. Young, 2008). The series was then released on AXN regional cable, and an edited version of the series aired on open television, on Televisa's Canal 5, one month after it ended on TVC, on September 25, in a 10 PM time slot ⁶⁵ (Ibid). The 13-episode first season reached a cable audience of 5 million in Mexico (J. Young, 2008).

Seasons two and three followed the same sequence and were released each of the following years ("Mujeres asesinas 2 de mediamates arranca el 2 de marzo 14 semanas de producción," 2009). The second season of *Mujeres Asesinas* launched in July 14, 2009, with the episode of *Clara Fantasirosa* (Imaginative Clara), the story of a woman (Edith González) who murders her neighbor in a fit of jealousy because she thinks her husband is having an affair with her. The third season of *Mujeres Asesinas* launched with *Irma de los Peces* (Irma of the Fish) starring Jaqueline Bracamontes, on September 23, 2010, and ended on December 10, 2010. Ratings for the first season were the strongest across all three seasons. Ratings were highest at the beginning of the season on both TVC and Canal 5, and steadily diminished with each subsequent episode (Lancer, 2009).

A fourth season of *Mujeres Asesinas* was promoted to the public, but was never produced (series rights extended over a three-year period). TVC objected to the cost increases associated with producing a fourth season (Mijares, 2011). According to Julio Di Bella, Executive Director of TVC, the third season didn't make the expected return on

⁶⁵ Channel 5 typically airs foreign-produced programming, with films and series at night.

investment based on faltering ratings, and, he reasoned, the goals outlined for a third run were too ambitious (Mijares, 2011). When pressed about the cancellation of *Mujeres Asesinas*, Pedro Torres remarked that he was turning his attention to producing comedies because “the country was in need of laughter and positivity,” and took the opportunity to plug a new series, *La que en paz descansa* (“May she rest in peace”), a comedy series about ‘divorced women, who for unexplained reasons, want to reconcile with their husbands’ (“Big Brother' está de regreso,” 2012). It is also important to consider the series cancellation in light of a significant downturn in advertising spending in 2009, brought about by a global economic crisis, which had a negative impact on the production of fiction in Mexico (OBITEL, 2010).

In the United States, *Mujeres Asesinas* debuted on Univision in April of 2009 to a prime-time audience of 4 million people (Levin, 2009). During its second season (2010), *Mujeres Asesinas* registered as the program with the highest ratings nationwide for audiences 18-34 years of age, with 4.6 million viewers (“Registra la serie “Mujeres asesinas 2” éxito de audiencia en EUA,” 2010).

THE MULTIPLE WINDOW DISTRIBUTION PATH

The distribution pattern for *Mujeres Asesinas* followed a distinct ‘windowing’ pattern over the life of the series. The practice of windowing is described as: “releasing new media texts on a staggered schedule, differentiated by medium or territory” (Timothy Havens & Lotz, 2012, p. 39). Alex Balassa, who was closely involved in the pre-sale negotiations for *Mujeres Asesinas*, explained the windowing strategy for the series, which was based on staggering each of the releases according to four

considerations: specific channel, territory, language and duration (Balassa, 2014). Based on the company's lack of experience with windowing practices, Pedro Torres hired specialized external consultants who provided initial guidance,⁶⁶ however, final decisions about the release sequence and timing of the series were made by Torres and Balassa through negotiations with partners.

Based on its level of investment, TVC was given 2 weeks (the equivalent of 2 episodes) to air the series before the series aired on Televisa's cable properties. Regional distribution on Sony's AXN was next, which was followed by access on open television in Mexico, ending with distribution in the U.S. through Univisión (see Fig. 3). Programming was released within relatively short time spans between windows, as a way to better control the distribution process (Timothy Havens, 2006). Contracts were made on a three-year basis (Balassa, 2014).

Window	Type	Territory	Ownership
TVC	National Cable Network	Mexico	PCTV
Unicable	National Cable Networks	Mexico	Televisa
Cablevisión ⁶⁷			
Megacable			
AXN	Regional Cable Network	Latin America	Sony
Canal 5	Broadcast TV Network	Mexico	Televisa
Univision	Broadcast TV Network	U.S.A.	Univisión

Figure 3. Windowing Sequence for *Mujeres Asesinas*

⁶⁶ Balassa also mentioned that Univisión required assurance that there would be no overlap in distribution territories.

⁶⁷ Cablevisión is the largest digital pay TV service provider in Mexico City.

The transmediatic environment for *Mujeres Asesinas* also included digital distribution through various channels (see Figure 4) and an active presence on social media, which will be discussed further on). These activities were important not only from a marketing and distribution perspective, but also as sites to engage with fans and generate loyalty (Orozco et al., 2012). Televisa Interactive Media made the content available on Esmás.com and TVolución.com (Both services launched in 2009⁶⁸) Univisión made its content available digitally for the first time in 2011, and released episodes of *Mujeres Asesinas* on its *Novelas y Series* channel (<http://novelasyseries.univision.com/mujeres-asesinas-3/>), on its own YouTube channel, and on a free “Univisión Videos” iPhone app, available through iTunes. Mediamates developed and controlled an official YouTube *Mujeres Asesinas* channel (<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLD44C5FB0A7CABF29>) (Balassa, 2014).

Portal	Type	Controlled by
TVolución	Streaming	Televisa
Esmas	Subscription-based	Televisa
YouTube	Streaming	The Mates
TVyNovelas	Streaming	Univisión
YouTube	Streaming	Univisión

Figure 4. Transmediatic Outlets for *Mujeres Asesinas*

⁶⁸ Esmás offers a pay-per-view model that requires downloading a proprietary video player, and TVolución offers free online streaming services. TV Azteca did not offer this type of service in 2009, but Warner Chanel Latinoamérica had recently introduced online streaming of popular content such as Gossip Girl, Terminator and Supernatural and had to cancel the service because its audience numbers exceeded the numbers on other windows, and they felt the need to protect the interests of its advertisers (Bastida, 2009).

The decision to launch the series on TVC (which was primarily a shopping channel with negligible ratings distributed across the country via Cablevision DF and Monterrey, Cablecom, Cablemás, Megacable and Telecable) was unusual. According to journalist and television critic Alvaro Cueva, the decision to launch the series on TVC, rather than on one of Televisa's cable properties like Cablevisión or Cablemás was a public relations strategy. Televisa has investments in the most important cable companies in Mexico, but had been criticized for overlooking TVC, which is owned by a consortium of cable companies known as PCTV. By flooding the company with advertising investments to promote the series, Televisa was rallying for support among cable companies against the impending legal threat of its competitor (Carlos Slim's Telmex) related to the introduction of triple-play services (Cueva, 2008). The PCTV consortium was formed during the 1990s as a way to facilitate the purchase of imported content from U.S. suppliers and facilitate international distribution across the region. However, the organization had lost relevance over the years, and was sanctioned by the Federal Competition Commission (CFC) for monopolistic practices in 2008 (Sigler, 2014). Among the companies identified was Megacable (owned by Enrique Yamuni) and Televisa's cable companies. Televisa withdrew its 60% stake in PCTV, and Megacable made an offer, subject to the approval of the Instituto Federal de Telecomunicaciones (Ifetel), which would increase its stake to 66% in 2014 (Ibid).

The strategy behind releasing the series on multiple platforms is rooted in a business practice that Fernando Pérez Gavilán, a representative of Televisa Internacional, identified as a "U.S. strategy." The intention is to exploit the greatest number of

distribution windows possible (Izarra, 2008b), which is an efficient way to keep momentum going for the series. By design, this strategy also generated multiple sponsorship opportunities over the course of three seasons, as a way to directly facilitate the production through financing, or indirectly, through bartering.⁶⁹

Although very few details are available on financials for the *Mujeres Asesinas* adaptation, a few key details emerged in an article published in CNN Expansion (Tavira, 2009). The revenues from the first season and second season (8 and 20 percent, respectively) were modest (Ibid), but in some cases were essential to financing the production going forward (international sales to Spain helped finance the production of the second season, for example). The business strategy was designed to be profitable over the long term, through syndication of the series and international sales -- the return on international sales was estimated to be between 20 to 30 times the cost of production (Tavira, 2009).

A partnership with YouTube was forecast to yield 50 percent of advertising revenue from a dedicated *Mujeres Asesinas* YouTube Channel, and sales of individual episodes on iTunes, (\$1.99 each) were calculated to yield a seventy percent return on each sale (Tavira, 2009). Additional sources of revenue included spot advertisements under various arrangements with the television channels in Mexico, including spots sold to advertisers for a cable television directory channel that had never carried content or advertising before (Leon de la Barra, 2014). This arrangement was negotiated by Torres

⁶⁹ Sponsors are buying access to audiences through a program in order to sell a product (Mayer, 2011, p. 106).

with Televisa, at no cost to Mediamates, as an additional avenue for promotion and advertising revenue (Ibid). The series didn't become profitable until the third season (Balassa, 2014).

Canned versions of the Mexican adaptation (distributed by Televisa International) traveled to Japan, China and Russia among other countries ("España tendrá su propia versión de la serie televisiva 'Mujeres asesinas'," 2008). No information was available on sales to other territories. It is interesting to note that within Mexico, a "luxury" boxed edition DVD of the original Argentinian series, was released in Mexico under the Tycoon label shortly after the Mexican adaptation debuted in 2008. The DVD, which contained only 4 episodes, was distributed in music stores, and promoted as a gift item to coincide with the holiday shopping season (Castillo Gochi, 2008).

DVD sales of *Mujeres Asesinas* were handled by Quality Films, a Mexican company (Balassa, 2014). One audience member, who purchased copies of the first and second season DVDs in the U.S., wrote a mostly glowing review on Amazon.com (i.e: "The DVD packages are classy, with 13 episodes on each and a booklet with nice photos and background on the stories, actors and production" but added the following criticism:

"Mediamates released these DVDs in the US and Canada without English subtitles. That is both culturally rude and financially stupid. They are excluding a larger market by not investing a little more in subtitles. But I am conflicted enough about *Mujeres Asesinas* to not really care whether the producers make more money. It is a guilty pleasure indeed, with emphasis on the guilt!" (Jamakaya, 2011).

This audience member's review suggests an awareness of a growing market in the U.S. that Mediamates may have overlooked, but one that is increasingly of interest to

global television players and new Spanish- and English-language Latino television networks in the U.S. (J. a. V. R. Piñón López, 2011).

Following the success of the Mexican adaptation, there were discussions between Televisa and Pol-Ka Producciones around the possibility of adapting the script for Spain, with the participation of Mediamates, but the project never materialized (Pérez Raigosa Enviada, 2008).

THE “TROPICALIZATION” OF *MUJERES ASESINAS*

During an interview conducted on the site of one of the international television markets, Torres mentioned that “the secret to television was to understand the audience” and, in his case, to ‘tropicalize’ the formats that were made available at international television markets (Tavira, 2009). By ‘tropicalization,’ Torres is inadvertently referring to the process of localization. Moran defines that:

“Localization refers to “a conscious effort by program producers to tweak program content to make it culturally relevant to domestic audiences. It’s about making programs real and authentic, understanding reality as producers’ particular understanding of a given local and national situation. Localization is implemented through a double movement: deleting foreign cultural markers that cause ‘cultural discount’ (Hoskins et al 1998) of imported formats and incorporating local elements that identify the show as a domestic product.” (Albert Moran, 2010, p. 63)

Alex Balassa, who coordinated the selection of episode scripts, explained that the writers on the team made decisions based on what they thought would work in Mexico, and what he referred to as “the psychology of Mexicans.” But it is telling that Balassa

also made a separate reference to U.S. Latino viewers⁷⁰ of Mexican heritage who feel a sense of nostalgia for their home country (Balassa, 2014). In this way, producers are mindful of meeting the interests of their U.S. corporate partners, while making their domestic audience their core audience.

When asked to describe the target audience for *Mujeres Asesinas*, Antonio Leon de La Barra, Torres' Chief Marketing Officer during the third season, described it as follows: "a broad audience that included men and women, 18 to 25, of an affluent economic class, who consume cable television and who would be interested in watching an alternative to the CSI television series." Producers were also banking on the idea that series would also be of interest to men and women of less affluent classes, thanks to its unprecedented line up of well-known Mexican stars (Leon de la Barra, 2014). This approach differs from Televisa's practice for *telenovelas*, which tend to target broad, undifferentiated audiences during prime time (Bielby & Harrington, 2008). It is interesting to note a practice that may have contributed to the series success on Canal 5, Televisa's open television channel: *Mujeres Asesinas* was broadcast during the same late night time slot⁷¹ that had been previously occupied by *Mujeres: Casos de La Vida Real* on Canal 5. The show focused on (real) cases of women who had suffered various forms of injustice, including rape, incest, child abuse, LGBT issues and domestic violence. Televisa cancelled the show in 2007, after a successful 22-year run, and replaced it with a

⁷⁰ Balassa focused on U.S. Latinos of Mexican heritage when speaking about the U.S. Latino audience. However, Latinos of Mexican heritage make up the majority of Univisión's viewers, and their communications consistently invoke a pan-Latino or Hispanic identity – as labels that carry a commercial value when they are applied to consumers. Rodríguez (1999) and Dávila (2001) have written about the commodification of the Spanish-language audience.

⁷¹ Televisa typically reserves its late night television slots for adults, male and female (Stavans, 2010)

string of adaptations, including *Mujeres Asesinas* (IberoAmerican Observatory on Television Fiction, 2008).

The Mexican adaptation of *Mujeres Asesinas* is mostly faithful to the Argentinian original, but in some cases, the producers made modifications that illustrate the hybrid nature of the television format industry's practices. As in the original, most episodes fit the overarching and recurring theme of women who are sentenced to prison for committing crimes against abusive men, with a few exceptions, where crimes are committed against other women who are either complicit in the abuse, or in perceived conflict with the lead character.

In the original script, stories are told in linear form by an unidentified observer who provides a 'voyeur' experience for the audience. The Mexican adaptation alters the story line by including an investigative context, with witnesses and perpetrators talking to the police. This new element, a police bureau of investigation that specializes in crimes committed by women, was an idea introduced by Pedro Torres, who felt the series would benefit from a unifying element (Izarra, 2008a). The 'Departamento de Investigaciones Especializado en Mujeres' (DIEM), is led by a tough and competent Sofia Capellán (played by Rosa María Bianchi) and a team of four experts, who inhabit a technologically-advanced crime unit that appears across all episodes in the series.

Mujeres Asesinas was among the first to attempt a version of a Mexican 'police procedural' along the lines of the popular global format CSI. The introduction of this narrative element provides a common thread that runs across all episodes, with identifiable characters that remain relatively unchanged over the life of the series, and

featuring different storylines in each episode (Bielby & Harrington, 2008, p. 54). This alteration distinguishes the adaptation from the original, which was classified as an anthology series or *unitario* (in *unitarios*, each episode is a completely self-contained storyline with unique characters). Series are more marketable in the global television marketplace, and they tend to generate different relationships with the audience, based on the common thread that flows through all episodes (Ibid).

The Mexican adaptation followed the original script in its cinematic treatment of the material, but took a decidedly different approach to its visuals, which have been described in the press as “glamorous” and “glossy.” The Argentinian series displays flat production values that read as “darker” and “grittier,” a la film noir. Many of the directors who worked on multiple episodes of *Mujeres Asesinas* are well-known Mexican filmmakers: Mafer Suárez, Carlos García Agraz, Álvaro Curiel, Mariana Chenillo, Chava Cartas and others. Prior to the series launch, Mafer Suarez warned that the Mexican adaptation would feature a visual presence that would differ from the original, following Pedro Torres’ ‘creative vision.’ In addition, Suarez said she discouraged the production team from seeing the original version to avoid being influenced in any way (Martinez Lozano, 2008). She also mentioned that the adaptation would also feature a quicker tempo that was more in keeping with ‘what Mexican audiences demanded’ (PRODU, 2007b).

One of the most significant departures for the Mexican series on the production side of things was the ability to work in HD format -- the Argentinian series was filmed on video, with a modest budget and was conceived for a domestic market in 2005

(Cueva, 1996). The ‘film for television’ treatment of visuals was a move that did not come without its share of adjustments for some of the directors in Mexico. At least one director was forced to learn how to work with high-definition cameras for the first time -- a challenge she said she readily embraced in order to work on the series (Izarra, 2009). The decision to film in HD format implied a higher cost of production (up to 20 to 30 percent higher than SD), but also guaranteed a larger market for the product, as well as a longer “shelf-life” (“Friends in deed: think in HD and talk about mobile--and you're exactly who the international television industry wants on its best-friends list," 2005). In addition, ‘new’ industry players such as Telcos, would be interested in HD products, and producers such as Pedro Torres were interested in delivering content that could be used to engage viewers on mobile (Ibid).

Filmmaker Carlos García Agraz mentioned the need to adjust to “television budgets and schedules.” This required adapting to new work routines and practices, such as the requirement to shoot with two cameras (photographers objected to having to set up lighting for two cameras), a rule that was designed to optimize production time (Izarra, 2008a). For *Mujeres Asesinas*, the Argentinian production team scheduled 6 full days to produce one episode, taking time to fine tune the script, build the characters, rehearse, and reshoot scenes as required (Cueva, 1996). The adaptation of *Mujeres Asesinas* followed a similar practice; with a season’s worth of episodes produced in the span of 13 or 14 weeks, at a rate of a little over one week for each episode (“Mujeres asesinas 2 de mediamates arranca el 2 de marzo 14 semanas de producción," 2009). However, a closer look reveals that the development phase stretched out over 6 months, followed by a pre-

production phase of 8 weeks, before the actual production work began (Balassa, 2014).⁷²

Finally, the production team in Mexico faced additional challenges associated with filming outdoors. The sets in the Argentinian original were studio-bound, filmed in studio back lots and mostly depict working-class environments, but the Mexican adaptation was produced both in studio and in exterior locations ("Mujeres asesinas 2 de mediamates arranca el 2 de marzo 14 semanas de producción," 2009). This also marks a departure from the visually flat and claustrophobic *telenovela* sets that viewers are accustomed to.

Finally, it is important to note that when asked about the level of participation or input from the Argentinian production team, the executives interviewed for this research emphasized that the adaptation was locally produced with the participation of Mexican actors and crew⁷³. Alex Balassa, who executive-produced the series in Mexico mentioned that a meeting was held between representatives of Mediamates and Producciones Pol-Ka following the purchase of the format, but made it clear that the adaptation was a Mexican production and there was no creative input from the Argentinian team (Balassa, 2014)⁷⁴.

***MUJERES ASESINAS* AS 'BRANDED ENTERTAINMENT'**

Mujeres Asesinas has been called the most costly series in Mexican television history. Beyond the cost of production, the cost for the marketing campaign to promote

⁷² For comparison, Televisa tapes an average of 26 scenes daily for *telenovelas* (Cited in J. Miller, 2010)

⁷³ With a few exceptions. A Spanish actress, Belinda, was invited to play opposite William Levy in *Annette y Ana Nobles*.

⁷⁴ This was also the case with *Mujeres Asesinas* adaptations in Italy, Colombia, Dominican Republic and Colombia (Canter, 2013).

the series prior to each season was 10 Million Mexican Pesos (over half a million USD) a figure that reportedly generated ten times its value in unpaid promotion via newspapers, magazines, radio, and digital channels. The promotional strategy for *Mujeres Asesinas* broke away from what had been standard practice in Mexico. Traditionally, producers have not been involved in the marketing of their products as this was considered the role of television channels (Carroll, 2012).

However, changes in the global television industry have introduced a range of practices referred to as “branded entertainment.” These practices came about as a way to keep consumers engaged with broadcasters in a media environment that has to fight for -- and keep -- their attention. Multiple screens, on-demand services, piracy, a narrowing gap between broadcast and cable realms—all of these things have forced broadcasters to consider how their content and their own brand might function in tandem:

“The promos, the ads, the social activity are no longer just to inform viewers about the show’s “coordinates.” They must constantly remind viewers why that show is brought to them by a specific network and why watching it there is different and possibly better than watching it elsewhere.” (Cadura, 2014).

The implication is that viewers can always get the same, or similar, content elsewhere. “Branded entertainment” is generally described as encompassing a mix of the following practices: sponsorship, product placement (also referred to as ‘leveraged content’), media integration deals (also called partnerships) and the use of social media and mobile technology (Nicholson, 2012).

In a 2011 MIP keynote speech, Ogilvy & Mather Worldwide CEO Miles Young stressed that branded content was now increasingly ‘digitally conceived,’ as opposed to

digitally executed (M. Young, 2011). The collaboration process between the brand and the media property thus begins during the development phase and continues through production, promotion and/or distribution, which transforms it into a ‘content system.’”

Young explained the concept as follows:

...All branded content has to be “multiplatform” and has to be capable of including or inciting dialogue, or a connection, and it has to be a part of a closed loop, so it is part of some sort of measuring system, in order to determine how it translates into preference and purchase. Depends on a mix of ‘owned channels, social channels and external channels’ all organized around big ideals.” (M. Young, 2011).

The business, as another U.S. industry insider observed, “is now and will increasingly be all about brand and rights management as opposed to purely traditional distribution” (“Fresh Perspectives,” 2011). Following the programming license agreement –PLA– between Televisa and Univision in 2011, the brand integration opportunities flourished across Televisa’s content properties as both companies began collaborating around product integration in programming (Vega, 2011). Under the terms of their new agreement, royalties paid to Televisa grew by 44 percent (Televisa, 2011). Prior to the agreement, Televisa’s canned programming was simply distributed to Univision, which made this type of business transaction impossible. Televisa’s annual report for 2011 described the changes as follows:

“Under the new partnership structure, our incentives and those of Univision are fully aligned. We have put in place the mechanisms necessary for close collaboration to help Univision expand its revenue base and build value. As part of this process, we have made Univision an integral part of our content planning process to ensure that we make our productions even more relevant to the U.S. Hispanic market and to advertisers targeting this growing demographic.” (Televisa, 2011)

The combined market power of Univisión and Televisa's core audiences is not to be underestimated. Mexico has a population of 110 million people whose purchasing power in 2009 was 1.8 trillion USD, and U.S. Hispanics are expected to attain that level of purchasing power in 2015 (Moreno Esparza, 2011). Univisión takes in \$2.5 Billion annually in advertising revenue across all its properties (Consoli, 2011). And, within Latin America, Mexico ranks second largest market for advertising spending, after Brazil. Total advertising spending in Mexico was \$3,933,600,000 in 2008, with free to air television capturing 60 percent of that figure (Sinclair, 2009). And, Mexico ranked third *globally* for product placement spending, capturing \$674 million, after Brazil and the U.S., which ranks number one⁷⁵ ("New PQ Media Data: Global Product Placement Spending Up 12% to \$8.3B in 2012," 2013).

Product placement was certainly a feature associated with the adaptation of *Mujeres Asesinas* in 2008. Torres and Balassa approached Nextel about the potential sponsorship, which hinged on product placement -- the sponsorship was essential to funding the production (Balassa, 2014).⁷⁶ Nextel signed on as the main sponsor for an investment of 6 Million Mexican Pesos (Tavira, 2009). Nextel's red Ferrari phones, which also featured radio ('push to talk' technology), were used throughout the series by police operatives in what one Nextel representative described as 'subtle' product integration⁷⁷ (Tavira, 2009).

⁷⁵ Mexico and Brazil, both markets with strong *telenovela* production, trail the U.S., which captures \$4.75 billion in product placement spending.

⁷⁶ Top 3 ad spending categories for pay television in 2010 included mobile telephony, automobiles and dental hygiene ("Canales Guía 2011," 2011, p. 160)

⁷⁷ Product placement practices are based on the following hierarchy, in ascending order: "a product is visible; an actor touches it; an actor consumes and comments on it; the product helps a lead actor perform a heroic feat." ("Lifting restrictions on product placement will boost Europe's TV industry," 2007)

The company's logo was prominently featured in the opening sequence of each episode on television and on digital/mobile streaming properties, as well as in promotion.

This partnership occurred during a time when Televisa was exploring potential synergies with Nextel Mexico in anticipation of gaining access to the mobile spectrum in 2010.⁷⁸ The return on investment for Nextel after the first season was reported as a 5 to 1 gain, which encouraged the company to invest again in the second season with a 50 percent increase in its investment (Balassa, 2014). Additional sponsorships came in the form of bartering agreements. Several products were made available for use in the production at no cost to Mediamates. These included black General Motors (GM) Chevy Tahoe SUV trucks, Hugo Boss fashions, and Apple Mac computers for use in the DIEM police unit (Balassa, 2014).

An important element of branded entertainment lies in the visual branding of the series. Bielby and Harrington (2008) have written about the centrality of 'aesthetics' to the business of global television, and although they don't identify aesthetics as visual branding per se, for the purposes of this paper I will use the terms interchangeably. Bielby et al point out that buyers in the television marketplace often make decisions about quality based on a product's visual appeal, which applies not only to production values and talent, but also to its promotion. They also use visual and other aesthetic elements as cues to help identify a program's genre. So, these types of cues become even more important when the genre is less clearly delineated (p.127) as is the case with

⁷⁸ Televisa invested 1.44 billion, to acquire 30 percent equity in Nextel Mexico in 2008, with an option to increase its stake shortly thereafter (Televisa, 2009b).

Mujeres Asesinas. Buyers and distributors are required, on some level, to “read” the content for potential resonance with audiences, and strong visual elements can also be helpful to overcoming colloquial differences in markets that share a common language.

Mujeres Asesinas was fairly consistent in its visual branding, relying heavily on the star quality of its actresses, sexualized imagery, and the use of black and red as base colors on all designs and promotion material, with little variation over the course of three seasons. The logo for the *Mujeres Asesinas* adaptation integrates the image of a moth, an element borrowed from the visual branding for the Argentinian series (moths are common symbol of death in Latin American popular culture).

Visual branding is in its very essence, a ‘hybrid message’ because it is a ‘form of communication that purports positive publicity’ (Balasubramanian, cited in Nicholson, 2012, p. 13). The visual branding for *Mujeres Asesinas* bore a striking resemblance to that of *Desperate Housewives* (see figures 5 and 6) whether that was intentional or not.



Figure 5. DVD cover for *Desperate Housewives* (Season 1) and site banner for *Mujeres Asesinas* (Season 1).



Figure 6. DVD cover for *Desperate Housewives* (Season 5) and promotional piece for *Mujeres ASESINAS* (Season 2).

Television executives in Mexico, who were interested in moving beyond *telenovelas*, into ‘glossy dramatic productions that can travel’ (J. Young, 2009) around that time would have certainly been aware of the global format. *Desperate Housewives* was in industry news because not only was the format successful in the U.S. (where 25 million viewers tuned in to watch each week during its first season in 2004) but the series also marked a milestone within the Latin American regional television space. The Spanish-language co-production (*Amas de Casa Desesperadas*) was an ABC - Disney Television International Latin America, Univisión and Producciones Pol-Ka co-production “adapted to the preferences of U.S. Hispanics”(A. M. de la Fuente, 2006). The Spanish-language adaptation debuted in Argentina and circulated in Latin America as well as the U.S., where it ranked among the top 10 shows, in English or Spanish, on TV among Hispanic adults ages 18-49 (Jensen, 2008).

By emulating a popular global format, or, at the very least, inviting indirect associations with *Desperate Housewives*, the producers developed a visual brand that integrated positive associations with the Mexican *telenovela* brand, through the images of well-known and well-loved stars, while at the same time, creating associations with a global product that has proven ‘universal’ appeal in the television marketplace. As Havens (2006) has suggested, shows branded by programming genres and subgenres, linked to producing countries, form the primary market product in international television, so certain products that fit a distinct genre (such as *telenovelas*) often carry associations with a brand that can be geographic -- national (as in ‘Mexican’), regional (as in ‘Latin American’) -- or corporate (as in ‘Televisa’). As Havens has pointed out, producers sometimes manage these associations to their advantage (p.88). It would make sense, then, for producers who are venturing into non-*telenovela* fiction programming territory, such as Televisa and Mediamates, to develop visual branding that invites associations with the best of both ‘worlds’, through an inherently hybrid communication strategy. By showcasing and promoting the participation of some of its best known *telenovela* stars, *Mujeres Asesinas* is banking on the Televisa brand, and its association with Mexican television, while simultaneously promoting a different visual treatment, instantly recognizable, that suggests it may have more in common with highly exportable U.S. drama-comedy-mystery series.’

In addition to visual branding, the generation and ‘management’ of “buzz” around *Mujeres Asesinas* focused on several activities that were fine-tuned as the seasons progressed. A public relations specialist by the name of Leo Marker was hired away from Televisa to develop a publicity plan that integrated social media (Balassa, 2014). The first approach involved hosting a series of high-profile public relations events. During the first

season, weekly media events were scheduled “to generate buzz and to indicate that this was something noteworthy” (Cueva, 2010). During the second season, the strategy shifted, and only one very high profile televised gala event was held. However, media coverage described the event as “the event of the year” and “an event of such style that it was deemed as the closest thing to some of the legendary events hosted by Televisa under the leadership of Emilio Azcarraga Milmo” (Cueva, 2009). Lead actresses, dressed in red gowns, filed in on a white carpet, stopping to grant interviews with the press and pose for photographers, before participating in a musical/variety show performance (Cueva, 2009). Audience members included local and national media representatives, who reported being treated to the finest meal and libations, thanks in part to some of the show’s ‘unnamed sponsors’ (Ibid).

During the third season, the strategy shifted once again. This time, a 3-day media event was held in two of Televisa’s largest studio facilities (the equivalent of half of its studio infrastructure). Over the course of three days, a wide variety of events were staged on 16 sets, and live-streamed on Tevolución.com (Izarra, 2010). Antonio León de la Barra, Mediamates’ Chief of Marketing at the time, described it as an impressive feat, based on the amount of coordination required. The event brought together twenty two of the stars, seven directors, and a production/event crew of over one hundred people.⁷⁹ The event was designed to produce all of the promotional content required for international distribution within a 3-day window, including content made according to the

⁷⁹ Interestingly, an internal email exchanged between multiple members of the coordinating team for the purpose of tallying up the amount of equipment, and the number of staff, included an entry that listed “two (paid) topless women and two (gratis) topless women “just because.”

specifications of Univisión and E! Entertainment Television. This strategy provided economies of scale that are the hallmark of television format leaders such as Endemol, a leader in the use of centralized production centers for the creation of grand/live events of this kind (Winslow, 2011).

SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGY

The social media strategy behind *Mujeres Asesinas* focused primarily on leveraging the social media platforms of some of the actresses who participated in the production. Actresses with impressive followings on Twitter alone included Galilea Montijo (5 million), Kate del Castillo (over 2 million), Angelica Vale (over 2 million) Carmen Salinas (over 300,000), Angelica María (186,000) and others. That *Mujeres Asesinas* have a strong digital presence was a requirement for working with both Televisa and Univisión, and one that Mediamates took seriously (Balassa, 2014). Mediamates developed a website that would become the destination for all digital content related to the series and made the content available to its partners under a non-exclusive arrangement (Balassa, 2014). On Facebook, a “*Mujeres Asesinas TV*” fan page followed the series, providing trailers, updates and announcements as well as behind-the-scenes interviews. In addition, special *Mujeres Asesinas* fan pages were created for each episode to encourage online engagement related to each lead actress. A special Twitter account (@asesinas) was also established for the series, and its use included hosting special Twitter events (T. M. Group, 2009).

Televisa and Univisión followed with similar strategies and content. Televisa developed a dedicated digital channel, *Mujeres Asesinas TV*, on Tevolución.com, which

featured streaming content that included interviews with some of the stars, insider peeks and virtual ‘backstage passes’ to live events (T. M. Group, 2009). Official *Mujeres Asesinas* webpages were also available on Televisa’s Esmas.com (<http://televisa.esmas.com/entretenimiento/programastv/mujeres-asesinas/>), and on AXN’s site (<http://la.axn.com/programas/mujeres-asesinas>).

Another strategy that was used to generate media ‘buzz’ around the show on social media was name-dropping. During interviews with the press, Pedro Torres regularly mentioned that he had been in conversation with well-known actresses (identified by name) about their ‘availability’ to participate in upcoming episodes. These mentions were picked up by the press around Latin America, especially in connection with the potential participation of actresses such as Eva Longoria (of *Modern Family* fame), Salma Hayek (actress, director and producer) and singer/songwriter, author and actress Thalía (““Mujeres asesinas" sin Eva y Thalía," 2010)⁸⁰. Mention of their names in connection with the series sparked renewed interest among fans and viewers, who took to social media to discuss the matter and offer their opinions. It is also worth noting that among Mexican celebrities, Thalia – the queen of Latin Pop – has one the largest social media platforms among Mexican celebrities, with over 6 Million Twitter followers, at the time of this writing. These “promotional excesses,” discussed above, constitute a way to generate word of mouth with an intended business outcome. Havens has written about “buzz” as it applies to the context of the global television sales business: “a cultural

⁸⁰ Pedro Torres mentioned that these actors had other obligations that prevented them from participating. In Longoria’s case, her contract with ABC was an impediment.

phenomenon, in the sense of a symbolic activity engaged in by a specific society which has specific business consequences” (Timothy Havens, 2006, p. 90). The concept is also applicable to the work of media marketers who are focused on the promotion of television series.

If social media is the most revolutionary thing to happen in media in the last century, as one prominent media executive recently proclaimed (Lotz, 2014), it is also true that business models around television and social media are still evolving. It is difficult to measure the impact of social media campaigns such as the campaign for *Mujeres Asesinas* just yet, but the growth of digital media and video consumption in Mexico is undeniable,⁸¹ which underscores the importance of reviewing these practices, particularly when partners, such as Univisión, and sponsors, such as Nextel, were targeting a younger demographic -- consumers of digital and mobile media⁸².

According to Antonio León de la Barra, who led marketing efforts during the third season of the series, one strategy that worked particularly well with social media was the use of contests and promotions related to Nextel. Other advertisers were not as knowledgeable about the opportunities associated with social media, or were simply unable to make spending decisions with the speed the project required (Leon de la Barra, 2014, p. 90). This suggests that the digital marketing and social media campaigns as they were implemented were primarily a strategy implemented to satisfy the requirements of financing partners (Televisa and Univision) and a transnational sponsor such as Nextel.

⁸¹ Online adoption is currently estimated to be 38% and is expected to reach 48% by 2016 (Delo, 2012).

⁸² Mexico is second only to Brazil for online consumption in Latin America (Delo, 2012).

TELENOVELA STARS AND TENSIONS SURROUNDING NARRATIVE THEMES

As with the Argentinian series, most attribute the success of the Mexican series to the participation of premium film and television talent. Well-known and critically-acclaimed film, theater and television stars, most of whom have international followings, included Verónica Castro, Lucía Méndez, Leticia Calderón, Irán Castillo, Isela Vega, Alejandra Barros, Nailea Norvind, Natalia Esperón, Damayanti Quintanar, María Rojo, Itatí Cantoral, Cecilia Suárez y Daniela Romo, as well as many others. Each of these actresses played the lead role in one episode, or in some cases may have played a support role or made a cameo. Never in the history of television in Mexico had so many well-known actresses been featured in one television production (Balassa, 2014). A few veteran actresses, who had been out of the limelight for some time, such as Verónica Castro and Lucía Méndez (who was married to Pedro Torres at one time) made their return to the small screen in *Mujeres Asesinas*. This helped endow the series with an aura of special significance in the eyes of some audience members and media critics. In this respect, entertainment journalist and *telenovela* expert Freddy Gudinni makes a distinction between actors who are trained in the Televisa's in-house acting academy⁸³, and actors with training in *bellas artes* (fine arts), who have developed careers that are more closely aligned with Mexico's classic theater and film tradition, such as Ofelia Medina and Jacqueline Andere (Gudinni, 2014).

Any resistance producers encountered from actresses who were invited to join the

⁸³ Televisa has carefully cultivated a star system. Most of Televisa's actors are groomed in its own special performing arts school, Centro de Educación Artística (CEA), and actors, producers and directors are retained through exclusive agreements (Televisa, 2009a).

cast prior to the first season vanished quickly once the series aired. Actresses were actively soliciting the roles, enticed by the opportunity to appear in the film-like series, under the tutelage of film directors, and in roles that would expand and showcase their acting talent in ways that were not possible in *telenovelas* (de Icasa, 2009). In some cases actresses in Mexico were so interested in playing a leading role in the series that they offered to perform without remuneration (Balassa, 2014; Lagomarsino, 2014). And, although the Argentinian production featured some of the same actresses in different roles over the life of the series⁸⁴, the Mexican series did not. Each of the stars was featured once, either in a lead role, support role, or in a cameo. This strategy also created a sense of anticipation among fans over the course of three seasons. *Mujeres Asesinas* was applauded for introducing opportunities for new talent and generating business for a variety of media talent in the local industry (2009).

One of the most unique things about *Mujeres Asesinas* was that actresses were cast “against type.” Before casting began for *Mujeres Asesinas*, Torres mentioned that he was looking for lead actresses who would be willing to take on a different type of role, one that would require ‘being on scene without make-up’ (Garavito, 2007). He was making it clear that these were not *telenovela* characters. Historically, Mexican *telenovelas* have followed a melodramatic formula that relies on a sense of romanticism (López, 1995) that provides an escape from reality. They have also put forth an aspirational element, one that is very much based on stereotyping as a carryover from the

⁸⁴ In Argentina, the acting talent was represented by the same theatrical agency, which may have contributed to the practice of repeat performances by some actresses (Balassa, 2014).

Mexican film tradition (Ramirez Berg, 2002). As a result, women's roles in *telenovelas* have typically followed a conservative, patriarchal, gendered and racial ideal that leaves little room for the exploration of alternatives.⁸⁵ Casting well-known and well-loved actresses in roles that portray women as complex and deeply-flawed characters whose histories lead them to commit unthinkable acts of violence, added to the series' formula for success.

Lucía Mendez, for example, played the role of a prostitute in "*Candida Esperanzada*" (Hopeful Candace), an episode that garnered the highest ratings over all three seasons ("Reconocimiento a la asesina mas vista "Candida Esperanzada"," 2011). Mendez is an internationally recognized Mexican/American singer/actress/business entrepreneur and a legend in Mexican film, theater and television. Over her career she has usually played the role of a woman of strong and noble character who succeeds against all odds, as in *Viviana*, a Televisa production (1978), which was a classic rags-to-riches story. Mendez is now approaching 60 years of age, so casting her in the role of an aging prostitute who becomes 'unhinged' is certainly a departure from the norm.

Carlos Pascual, who collaborated on the script, mentioned that some actors had a difficult time understanding how to model the depth of the characters as they were written. In his words: "they had a difficult time understanding that this wasn't a 'black or white' situation – that they didn't have to be completely evil or angelic" (Lejarazu, 2008). Others admitted that the roles pushed them creatively, but felt the need to add disclaimers

⁸⁵ This pattern changed with the arrival of TVAzteca. TV Azteca's productions began to incorporate social themes and draw elements from the current m

about their own ability to commit murder. Yet others, such as Daniela Castro, were candid about tapping into a ‘darker side’ to perform on camera and admitting that murder was an option if anyone hurt one of her daughters -- although that comment may have been solely for the benefit of series promotion (2009).

In many cases, actresses felt a need to express their opinions about themes in *Mujeres Asesinas*, and distance their public persona from their roles. However, most took the opportunity to highlight their experience as an invitation to reflect about the place of violence in their own lives. María Rojo, who played the role of *Emilia Cocinera* (a woman who murders her lover and feeds customers empanadas made with her lover’s bodyparts) believes all women experience some form of violence, whether they are ‘actresses, senators, married or divorced.’ Rojo is, in fact, a former member of the Mexican Senate (2006-2012). She used her participation in the series to voice her opinions about the place of women in the workplace. For example, she says all women experience misogynist comments, and have to work twice as hard to attain what men have ("Prefiere María Rojo realizar trabajos cortos como "Mujeres asesinas"," 2008). Cecilia Suarez, who played the role of a woman who attacks her unfaithful lover with acid in *Ana Corrosiva*, expressed support for the innovative storyline: “A great portion of the public wants to see stories that are told from a different point of view” --- a *female* point of view (Martinez Lozano, 2008).

In addition to the unconventional roles, the series delves into various forms of violence these women are subjected to within the private realm such as verbal abuse, physical abuse, incest, adultery, and abandonment. Within the public realm, violence

takes the form of rape, sexual harassment, prostitution, corruption, and discrimination (in various iterations), for example. These themes get at issues of femininity, domesticity, and familial and professional relationships that generally cut across all classes. In this way, the series offers viewers multiple points of identification, and brings to the forefront topics that have been considered taboo. Because these episodes are based on real cases of women who were prosecuted for their crimes, there is a tension associated with the melodrama that invites viewers to question the dominant social order. Even as the series offers a gritty version of reality, its popularity, and the public controversy attached to its circulation suggests that *Mujeres Asesinas* resonated deeply within certain sectors of Mexican society.

CONTROVERSY, INSTITUTIONAL CENSORSHIP AND SELF-IMPOSED RESPONSES

Following the launch of *Mujeres Asesinas*, television critic/journalist Alvaro Cueva published a seething critique that centered on two issues. The first focused on ‘quality.’ Having followed the original Argentinian series on cable television, Cueva felt that the Mexican adaptation, in contrast, was ‘a joke.’ He objected to the practice of remaking foreign series rather than producing original content, given the country’s international prestige in the global television marketplace (he later reversed his position when the Mexican adaptation became a ratings success in the U.S.) (Cueva, 2010). Mexican entertainment writer/critic and media personality Freddy Gudinni had a similar take, but interprets the use of formats (sometimes referred to as “refritos”) as a threat to the *telenovela* genre:

“There are no longer opportunities for new producers or writers, so we have the same ‘mafia’ of producers returning again and again to the same sources. How about reading a book? It’s easier for them to return to “*refritos*” (formats), and this is killing the (*telenovela*) genre. I predict the demise of *telenovelas*. *Telenovelas* have been the most successful programs on television, but they are being phased out. I’m not the only one who thinks so. Maritza Garrido (who has written great *telenovelas*), and I gave a conference four years ago at the Society of Writers where we talked about this. They are making better productions, yes, in a technical sense, but there will come a day when *telenovelas* as such will no longer exist because there is a lack of novelty. The genre will disappear.” (Gudinni, 2014)

The second critique Cueva leveled against the series was related to the portrayal of women, which was a critique that resonated with feminist groups in Mexico. Cueva remarked that *Mujeres Asesinas* promoted the idea that women were evil and dangerous. He leaned on an example of an episode that centered on a woman who had been sexually abused as a child. Instead of presenting the woman as a victim, the implicit message was that victims of sexual abuse were potential criminals, waiting to snap (Cueva, 2008). Cueva questioned why authorities, advertisers and the ‘conservative Mexican cable companies’ did not voice opposition to the series. Promoting the series, he felt, was the equivalent of celebrating the death of the women of Juarez.⁸⁶

Although he referenced the cases of femicide in Ciudad Juarez, which have received the most attention internationally⁸⁷ to make a point, Cuevas was reacting to gender relation portrayals that fly in the face of femicide rates in Mexico, which are alarming. According to a UN report issued in 2011, Mexico is ranked 16th in the world

⁸⁶ He was referring to the violent murders of hundreds of women and girls in the Northern city of Ciudad Juarez, which borders the U.S., during the 1990s.

⁸⁷ It was in the context of the murders of women in Ciudad Juarez that the term “femicide” was first used in Mexico.

for the incidence of homicides against women, and the rates have continued to escalate steadily since 2007. Violence against women in Mexico is generated within a deeply patriarchal system based on inequality and social exclusion, and is aggravated by a pattern of impunity that is characterized by a poorly managed justice framework. Women who try to access the justice system are frequently mistreated and discriminated against (Echarri Canovas, 2011) and when they are murdered, one in four cases goes without a forensic investigation (Solera, 2013). This state of affairs is intensified by a general context of insecurity and violence associated with the drug trade and the government's response to these activities since the presidency of Felipe Calderón. Although President Enrique Peña Nieto claims that violent crime has waned since he took office late in 2012, the statistics don't support that claim (Solera, 2013).

Feminist, social justice and activist groups voiced opposition to the series. Martha Lucía Micher, Director of the Instituto de las Mujeres del Distrito Federal, believes *Mujeres Asesinas* denigrates women, but also expressed concern about the level of violence and sexual content, which, she said 'bordered on the pornographic.' She felt that the stories could have been told by the women, and although she admitted that this may have been the intention behind the production, the treatment given to their cases does nothing to help solve the problem, which she hints, is systemic: "We don't want *Mujeres Asesinas*... We aren't all killers. There are women who are silent their whole lives, and never hurt their aggressor. Don't invite people to commit murder. We want to solve the problem" (Durán, 2008).

Actress Maya Zapata, who played the role of a prostitute in "Las Cotuchas" (in

the third season, 2010), hoped that the series might spur a call to action to change the law. In her view, sex workers are always lured into the profession based on their economic and sociocultural circumstances, and never arrive at the line of work by choice. Her hope was that the project would ‘catch the attention of the authorities so that the law could be modified to consider the johns, rather than the sex workers, delinquent.’ (“Revelará Maya Zapata sentimientos de sexoservidoras en película,” 2010).

Others found the critiques of *Mujeres Asesinas* absurd. Claudia de Icasa, with *Reforma Magazine*, agreed that the themes were strong and the visuals were unusually intense, but, she argued, they reflect life. Viewing these episodes was an invitation to reflect for anyone who is experiencing situations that are similar to the ones depicted in *Mujeres Asesinas*. The problem, according to Alex Balassa, who executive-produced 40 episodes of the series, was that even though the series exposed important social themes that need to be discussed, over time, he came to realize that the series did, in fact, promote violence because of the narrative closing. By highlighting the legal consequences of violence, the underlying message reinforced a continuation of fear, hatred, and revenge, instead of building awareness around non-violent solutions⁸⁸ (Balassa, 2014). Entertainment writer and critic Freddy Guddini agrees, and added the following:

⁸⁸ Balassa left Mediamates to launch an independent production company, Blindspot (www.blindspot.tv), shortly before the third season of *Mujeres Asesinas* launched, and now specializes in “value-based entertainment.” He described the concept as entertainment content that reinforces positive social values and that focuses on constructive matters. His company has worked on projects for Zodiak/Televisa, Fox International, National Geo, Discovery, and others. He believes the success of *Mujeres Asesinas* was a critical milestone in his career, giving him significant name recognition in the industry (Balassa, 2014).

The series only covers the crime, but you never find out what happened to the women after they carried out their prison sentence. What kind of life did they lead? How were they received by society? Were they rejected for their actions? (Gudinni, 2014).

The desire to see something positive, an element of redemption, would have made watching the series easier (he confessed that he had only seen 3 or 4 episodes and didn't analyze it or recommend it because he found it "ugly"). In his words: "if you want ugliness, all you have to do is pick up the daily newspaper." However, he conceded that the series will have historical value in time, and will stand as a testament to great acting performances. He believes that younger generations will benefit from learning from some of the great Mexican actresses who participated in the production (Gudinni, 2014).

The series was broadcast between 2008 and 2010. In 2012, Mexico modified the penal code to criminalize femicide and created institutes around the country to prevent, investigate and prosecute cases ("Mexico Gaining Ground in Efforts to End 'Femicide', Other Violence against Women, Delegation Tells Anti-Discrimination Committee," 2012). This was a notable achievement, considering that calls to action by women's groups, including one that very same year, were routinely opposed by State agencies. (Goche, 2013). It is impossible to know whether the series had any impact on swaying public opinion on the matter, but it did bring attention to a topic that was salient in the social, political and cultural milieu of the country at the time.

CENSORSHIP

Before the series aired on open television, Torres announced that modifications would be made in order to comply with national censorship rules that regulate open

television⁸⁹. In some cases, words would have to be ‘beeped’ out, but in most cases, further editing would be required. Torres consistently warned that the series was meant for a mature audience, and that all episodes would carry a warning at the beginning to that effect. In addition, the series was scheduled to air at 10 PM, when children would be asleep (Durán, 2008). Torres knew that episodes with sexual content would be particularly controversial; episodes such as *Sandra Trepadora*, where Itatí Cantoral plays a woman who murders her victims at the height of orgasmic pleasure during the sexual act.

In *Eliana Cuñada* (Eliana, Sister-in-Law) a lesbian scene between Fernanda Castillo and Dulce María, who play a married woman and her sister-in-law, was severely edited before it appeared on open television (Hernández, 2011). The director, Chava Cartas reportedly exceeded the limits established in the script by the writers, and the edits were so severe that many audience members reported not understanding the storyline (Woodside, 2011). However, this ‘mistake’ proved useful to DVD sales for the third season. Sales spiked after an announcement that they would contain uncensored and uncut lesbian love scenes between the well-known actresses (Hernández, 2011).

It is interesting to note that fiction programs dealing with themes of sexual

⁸⁹ The government body in charge of regulating television content is the General Directorate of Radio, Television and Cinematography (Dirección General de Radio, Televisión y Cinematografía, RTC). According to a Federal Radio and Television Act established in 1960 and updated in 2002, the agency reported initiating 549 proceedings, 80% of which were against Televisa and TV Azteca combined, between 2002 and 2009. The charges included everything from “negative and disturbing influences on harmonious childhood development,” to “foul language,” “irregularities in broadcast content” (such as surreptitious advertising), and replacing time reserved for “government programming” with other types of content (Sosa-Plata, 2011).

diversity had been on the rise in Latin America right around that time, and the trend seemed to be heightened in Mexico (Huizar, cited in OBITEL, 2010, p. 48). However, the visibility of gays on television in Mexico continues to be relegated to coverage in the news, or to objects of ridicule in talk shows, support characters in *telenovelas* or to other “filler” roles that are meant to add “color,” or comic relief (Huizar, 2011). Other Latin American countries have recently adopted homosexuality as an important social theme in popular television fiction (Brazil, Argentina, Venezuela and Uruguay in particular), but Mexico has been hesitant to take a similar approach (Huizar, 2011), even after the passage of the same sex marriage law in Mexico City in 2010.

In one case, an episode that aired on cable was omitted from the line up for open television for “programmatically reasons.” *Patricia Vengadora*, featuring Dayamanti Quintanar and Alex Ayala was based on a case of child abuse (“Cancela Lucero participación en “Mujeres Asesinas”,” 2008). Carlos Pascual, who edited the adaptation’s script, expressed his dissatisfaction with censorship of the series as follows:

“I know they are going to cut some sex scenes and delete the curse words. That seems absurd, because it’s one of those stupid morality things... When we’re eating a meal, all of us in Mexico watch the news and see victims of beheading and murder, but when we’re watching a fiction series that is based on reality, they censor that. I don’t understand” (Garavito, 2008).

Internal self-censorship seemed to be particularly non-negotiable when it was related to religion. Pedro Torres admitted that *Mujeres Asesinas* would not include references to religion or include religious themes, “out of respect for the public” (Pérez-

Raigosa, 2009).⁹⁰ He was referring to *Marta Odera*, the first episode in the Argentinian series, which was based on the case of a Catholic nun who murdered her lesbian lover.⁹¹ Pascual mentioned receiving unsolicited stories about cases involving members of the Catholic Church from fans of the series who contacted them through the official fan page. The Mediamates team decided it would be very difficult to approach the subject because “most Mexicans are Catholic.” He added: “We live in a conservative society when it comes to religion.” (Pérez-Raigosa, 2009). Although these rationales may have certainly played into the decision to pass on adapting episodes with religious characters, themes or undertones, it is also likely that producers were avoiding anything that might negatively impact international sales. As one industry journalist noted in a NATPE trade publication, broadcasters around the world are careful to avoid content that expresses particular political or religious views (unless they specialize in that particular niche) (Somers, 2011).

FICTION, POPULAR CULTURE AND NATIONALISM

During a regional television industry summit on *Telenovelas* and fiction series held in Colombia in 2009, Pedro Torres emphasized the industry’s obligation to “take on grand themes that preoccupy people in Latin America and to create a space for reflection” (Albillos, 2009). A tall order, considering that the sale and flow of television formats, particularly non-*telenovela* fiction formats, that originate in Latin America is riddled with

⁹⁰ A vast majority of Mexicans, over 80 percent, were Roman Catholic in 2005 (Sosa-Plata, 2011)

⁹¹ It is interesting to note that *Marta Odera* was the *only* episode included in a promotional DVD Artear took to the NATPE market held in Miami in 2011.

challenges. Beyond the obvious challenge of finding an optimal formula for commercial success, these productions must find a genre ‘fit’ to facilitate their sale in the international marketplace. For example, producers who have experimented with other genres, such as Brazilians who experimented with action series -- among the most widely distributed genres globally –during the 1970s were not able to translate the genre into a mainstay of national production (J. D. Straubhaar, 2007, p. 187). However, more ‘universal’ elements of the action series, such as violence, have found their way into other genres, such as *telenovelas*, as one strategy to attract male viewers to the audience. In some cases, subgenres of *telenovelas* have been able to successfully integrate these elements, with other elements that reflect the historical conditions of their production and consumption such as *narco-telenovelas*, which focus on drug trafficking (Cabañas, 2012; J. Piñón López, 2014)

This process of hybridization, or borrowing elements from other genres, has permeated the production process for *Mujeres Asesinas*. For example, the decision to incorporate elements of crime procedurals, along the lines of the global television format CSI implies that the series was targeting not only a more affluent demographic who would have been exposed to imported television and a variety of genres, but that would also generate an element of recognition (brand recognition) with potential buyers in the global program market, as has been discussed previously.

If, as Waisbord has suggested, (2004) “television formats inadvertently provide spaces for the representation and organization of national culture” it is important to consider that assertion in relation to a production such as *Mujeres Asesinas*, and in

reference to a trend that surfaced in Mexican television around 2008-2010. Guillermo Orozco Gómez et al (OBITEL, 2010) noted a trend in *telenovelas*, and specifically those produced by Televisa (but also by TV Azteca, to a lesser degree), that marks a shift in the national expression of the genre, beginning in 2007. For the first time in its 50-year history, some of the elements of *telenovelas* that characterized the melodramatic form disappeared. The authors describe a ‘new’ approach (‘neo-*telenovelas*’) much more rooted in realism, which is a major departure from the sense of naïve romanticism that is so typical of the form and the use of relatively ‘universal’ settings (or, that settings that did not make explicit reference to Mexico). These ‘new’ *telenovela* forms openly reference (Mexican) civic duties and messaging, a particular ideology (rooted in a conservative worldview and favoring the maintenance of the *status quo*), identifiably Mexican settings, and an inordinate amount of violence (p.305). These productions begin to showcase a reality that is crude and violent. The treatment of violence on screen is no longer implied – murders are now shown in detail, as are acts of extreme physical and verbal violence. These practices, which, in a sense, contribute to ‘naturalizing’ violence, have been understood as veiled attempts to rally for support of president Felipe Calderón’s efforts to fight crime and the drug cartels in the context of escalating drug-related violence and cartel warfare (p. 307).⁹²

Although *Mujeres Asesinas* is not a *telenovela*, these observations apply equally well to the series. As a reality-based fiction series, *Mujeres Asesinas* presents a view of

⁹² Televisa submitted a proposal to the Federal Elections Committee in 2009 requesting approval to exchange the 48 minutes allotted to political ad campaign spots for 30 minutes of mentions in *telenovelas*, as an attempt to legalize new forms of political marketing (OBITEL, 2010, p. 307)

society that is essentially ‘broken.’ In this sense the adaptation is consistent with the Argentinian original, which draws inspiration from the Argentine literary tradition of the *novela negra* (Ostrom, 2011). However, the Mexican production breaks with that tradition, by introducing the investigative unit (DIEM) as a narrative element that seeks to “restore order.” This new script element met with criticism from audience members, some of whom who found the idea of a highly modern, efficient and ethical police force in Mexico laughable (Garavito, 2008). Ibsen Martínez believes that law and order themes (in *telenovelas*) haven’t really taken hold in Latin America because people who live in these institutionally volatile environments rarely feel they can rely on the government or the justice system (Martínez, 2010, p. 64).

Following the cancellation of *Mujeres Asesinas*, one of the projects that Mediamates took on was a Televisa project designed to commemorate Mexico’s bicentennial – a project that reportedly captured a significant amount of public funding (Vilasmil, 2012). But the collaboration between Torres, Televisa and the government became the topic of intense public scrutiny when, in 2011, Mediamates produced *El Equipo* (The Team). The 15 one-hour episode series, which aired on Televisa during a prime time schedule, was the first police procedural series to be produced in Mexico (“Mexicans Don’t Trust Law & Order,” 2011).⁹³ The series highlights Mexico’s crime-fighting federal police force as professional and trustworthy crime-fighting force. The production received so much cooperation from the national police force, including access

⁹³ *El Equipo* was the brainchild of Pedro Torres, who modeled the series after the popular global CSI television franchise.

to its command center, specialized training and equipment, that it was repeatedly criticized as blatant propaganda designed to alter public perceptions about the government's handling of the drug war (Hecht, 2011). Alvaro Cueva, one of Mexico's most prominent television critics, remarked that characterizations were completely out of touch with reality: "The federal police are good-looking, athletic, sensible ... and well-dressed. The criminals, on the other hand, are ugly, dark-skinned, pot-bellied, heartless and dress awfully," which may have contributed to public sentiment around the advertainment feel of the series (Hecht, 2011).

In a country plagued by a corrupt federal police force, where many crimes go unreported for fear of the authorities, Torres' insisted that the impetus for the project was his attempt to break away from the soap operas that dominate prime-time (Malkin, 2011a). Torres also reasoned that *El Equipo* "may lure more young people to join the force because many Mexicans aspire to be like characters in soap operas" (Gomez Licon, 2011). In response to criticism about the series, Torres stated: "You can't make a police drama that is too complex or subtle yet, because the audience is accustomed to one language, and it's the one of soap operas." (Malkin, 2011a).

Legislators in Congress filed a formal complaint about *El Equipo* and demanded an accounting of public funds used to support the production of the series, citing the effort as 'immoral.' Ratings of *El Equipo* were eclipsed by "*La Reina del Sur*" (Queen of the South), an imported *telenovela* about the rise of a female drug trafficker (produced by the U.S. network Telemundo), which prompted one critic to ironically remark that "Mexicans may still be more inclined to believe that a beautiful young woman can become a

dangerous outlaw than they would believe that the country could be protected by a reliable police force” (Gomez Licon, 2011). Or, as one *New York Times* journalist observed: “When it comes to American police dramas, which can be seen any night of the week here, Mexicans have long suspended their disbelief. But when the action is closer to home, TV police clearly seem to rub a nerve. (Malkin, 2011a)

CONCLUSION

The relationship between hybridity and agency within the context of globalization as it plays out in the Mexican adaptation of *Mujeres Asesinas* provides a glimpse into the television format industry for Spanish-language media, the contradictory nature of fiction format production, the complex web of local, national, regional and global relationships and interests that are implicated, and the nascent status of independent production in Mexico.

As this chapter has shown, the establishment of a subsidiary of Endemol in Mexico (through Televisa) and the commercial success of global television formats such as *Big Brother*, generated interest in the production of television formats beyond *telenovelas* and planted an awareness of the exporting potential of ‘home-grown’ adaptations. Independent producers, such as Pedro Torres, who have traditionally focused on marketing and advertising, are finding opportunities in the broader media content market, and are beginning to integrate television production with digital and social media.

It is clear, through the example of *Mujeres Asesinas*, that entrepreneurs, such as Pedro Torres, who worked with Endemol and Televisa, bring to the work of transnational television production a specific form of social and cultural capital that endows them with

a professional advantage in the local industry. At the same time, ‘independent’ media entrepreneurs, such as Torres, find their work simultaneously enabled and constrained by the commercial and political interests of powerful regional and global players, whether they are investing in the production and driving its financial viability, introducing new business structures and modes of production/distribution, or facilitating relationships with producers and distributors in other world regions. In exchange, independent producers such as Torres bring to the Televisa seal a measure of flexibility and innovation that helps the company diversify its content offerings (Hesmondhalgh, 2006).

What emerges from this study is the notion of an ‘interdependent’ producer. These actors represent locally-embedded nodes within a globally-integrated network that is increasingly motivated to develop content that is relevant to local and global audiences (Bielby & Harrington, 2008, p. 89). The intersection of television formats, multi-channel distribution and branding in *Mujeres Asesinas* is a nexus that shifts the focus of ‘cultural translation’ to an emphasis on producing content that can strike a balance between story and marketing/branding strategy to bridge differences between television audiences.

Looking towards the future of television in Mexico, the new regulatory framework, and the transition to digital broadcasting will likely create additional opportunities for independent producers to help meet the demand for national content. It is also highly likely that there will be continued pressure to deliver U.S. networks and cable channels with high-value, high-budget series that will require international financing partners, so as opportunities arise for new players, so will there be increased competition at the regional level, as the rise of Telemundo co-productions with Colombia

shows (J. Piñón López, 2014). However, as Sinclair and Straubhaar (2013) have pointed out, the pattern in Latin America suggests that Televisa and TV Azteca will continue to hold and defend their dominant positions in Mexico and in the Spanish-language television market for some time.

Finally, the popularity of *Mujeres Asesinas*, and the controversy it generated nationally, illustrates the tensions that exist around the hybrid articulation of cultural identity and the nation's cultural and even political practices and traditions. This research supports the notion that popular melodramatic forms can carry critical potential (López, 1991) even as they reinforce the status quo.

CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSION

This dissertation is concerned with hybridity in television format business practices through a case study of *Mujeres Asesinas* (“Killer Women”), a fiction series developed in Argentina for a domestic audience (2005-2008), and adapted in Mexico for a transnational Spanish-language audience (2008-2011). A hybridity and critical transculturalism theoretical framework (Kraidy, 2005) provides a multi-layered approach to the inquiry by counterposing two distinct locales with the institutions, practices, processes and relationships that link them, as well as the hybrid text that serves as the site of negotiation.

Although there is a significant body of work on the *telenovela* trade in Latin America, we don’t know much about the production of other genres in the region, or about the role of independent producers ‘in the margins’ who are emerging on the global television scene through television format production (Oren & Shahaf, 2012). This becomes especially relevant in light of Argentina’s new status as a leading exporter of television formats on the global stage, and on the series status as a format that traveled in a South-to-South and then South-to-North trajectory. It is also important because although much work has been done on television formats and how they are localized for particular national audiences, this project illustrates some of the less evident transnational processes and relationships implicated in intra-regional production exchanges. As Oren and Shahaf (2012) have pointed out, “discrete national histories do little to fully explore the multiple contact zones of television as a global textual system (p. 2).

In order to understand hybridity as it applies to production in a much more culturally-nuanced way, this study sought to answer questions about how *Mujeres Asesinas* came to be developed as a surprise hit in its domestic market, and how it came to be adapted in Mexico for a transnational audience. Because the series was as commercially successful as it was innovative and controversial in both countries, it was important to question the role of independent producers in reference to each other and in reference to other media players in their domestic markets as well as abroad. Finally, this study was also concerned with identifying the commercial and cultural-ideological tensions and contradictions inherent in the text, in order to better understand issues of power from a multi-layered approach to production that considers two different nationally-embedded global media sites within the same cultural-linguistic market. It is clear that production in Latin America has become more interdependent and transnational. *Mujeres Asesinas* encapsulates what is going on in the telenovela industry more generally, and provides insight into what Piñón has described regarding the transnationalization of business practices and relationships in Latin America.

The findings of this study underscore the continuing and defining role of nation states as primary sites of media regulation and cultural policy-making, even as opportunities for new players and new content begin to arise (J. D. Straubhaar, 2007). In both Argentina and Mexico, the State both enables and constrains the hegemonic commercial systems that prevail within their borders, including the activities of the most powerful media players. The complex histories of broadcast regulations are distinct to each nation, but as we have seen, both countries continue to make a range of attempts at gaining greater

control of broadcasting and other media, from perspectives that shift, but by large privilege economic concerns as well as social and cultural concerns. Both Argentina and Mexico have implemented media reform measures in the last few years. In Mexico, recent antitrust legislation has focused mainly on telecommunications and on breaking up the duopoly of Televisa and TV Azteca in the broadcasting space (Hopewell, 2014). In Argentina, the recent introduction of anti-trust legislation was directly aimed at curtailing Grupo Clarín's dominance in the domestic market in anticipation of the transition to digital terrestrial television (Barbadori, 2012). It also established new parameters around the regulation of content, created a new State regulatory entity to enforce the law, and introduced subsidies to support the development of television production (Repoll, 2010). In Argentina, these measures have already begun to encourage the development of independent television. However, it bears reminding that companies such as Grupo Televisa, and Grupo Clarín will continue to exert a powerful measure of influence in the region and in their domestic markets, and will continue to serve as important catalysts for multi-layered media flows in the region for some time (J. D. Straubhaar, 2007).

The textual analysis of *Mujeres Asesinas* provides insight into the continuing place of the national as an important element in the reworkings of the series for local and transnational audiences in a multichannel media environment. As the case of *Mujeres Asesinas* demonstrates, producers are not creating and adapting content solely for local/national markets or global markets; they are increasingly motivated to create and adapt content that appeals to both domestic and global audiences (Bielby & Harrington, 2008). This is, in part, a byproduct of hybrid business practices that encourage

windowing, entertainment branding, new media and digital distribution -- all of which play into the production process from the moment of development and ultimately determines a project's viability.

As this case study of *Mujeres Asesinas* also demonstrates, innovation in the margins is a byproduct of the emergence of independent producers on the global stage, who operate in the shadows of media giants in their domestic markets. However, they are not the counter-hegemonic independent producers we tend to think of in a more traditional sense; rather, they are entities that are inextricably enmeshed in a complex web of local, national and transnational links that paint a different picture—one of an ‘interdependent producer.’ These producers operate as arms of powerful media corporations in their own countries, but have the freedom to take risks and exercise a degree of creative autonomy. They are also in a position to negotiate with (or capitulate to the demands of) more powerful players, such as foreign television networks, telecommunications and mobile companies, etc. So, while this dissertation has focused on the multiple levels or realms of hybridity in the production of *Mujeres Asesinas* and celebrated the possibility of a shifting environment that allows for new alternatives in Latin American television, it has also tried to address some of the ways in which hybridity is reflecting uneven development on multiple layers (i.e. structural, organizational, etc.). It is clear that important and enduring power differentials remain in global and regional television, which provides further support for Straubhaar's notion of asymmetrical interdependence (J. D. Straubhaar, 1991) in an increasingly complex media environment.

Finally, my research supports the suggestion that popular melodramatic forms can carry critical potential even as they reinforce the status quo (López, 1995). What is unique about *Mujeres Asesinas*, though, is that the series exposes the unfair treatment women are so often subjected to in both their private and public lives, and adds something new to the public discourse that circulates about *telenovelas*. *Mujeres Asesinas* does it in a way that is ironic, because, on the surface, the series seems to reinforce traditional gender roles and representations; but flips the narrative (women who kill the perpetrators of their injustices) questions their motives (are they cold-blooded murderers, or might they be victims?) and introduces characters who are well-rounded, deeply flawed and discontent with their prescribed lot in life within a conservative society that continuously denies or limits their rights. As Acosta-Alzuru's research (2003) has shown, "feminism" and "feminist" are loaded terms that overwhelmingly carry negative connotations in Latin America, so even when television viewers embrace representations of gender equality and justice on television, they will, by large, adamantly reject identification or association with these terms. As Moran has suggested, "popular culture generally (and television in particular) is a crucial level of mediation between political ideology and the more disjointed, often internally contradictory level of everyday experience and commonsense" (Albert Moran, 1998, p. 177). What is most interesting about *Mujeres Asesinas* is that although the original book that inspired the series was written from a feminist perspective, and adapted through a hegemonic communication process that involved writers, producers, actors, media executives, and others invested in the production of shared meanings within a commercial media system, the text managed

to retain a progressive element that is subtle yet evident. In this sense, despite any changes made along the way, including multiple adjustments associated with localization efforts, the theme remains universal, for this is, in fact, the contemporary paradox of feminism (Acosta-Alzuru, 2003). In conclusion, this study suggests that the television format industry, through the participation of independent producers who are willing to take on a measure of risk, is introducing a small measure of diversity in Latin American television. It will be interesting to see how this trend develops over the coming years.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE WORK

As I discovered during the process of writing this dissertation, there is a lack of data on the Latin American television format industry. The field of “formatology” (Albert Moran & Aveyard, 2014) would benefit from identifying patterns in intra-regional and extra-regional collaborations or partnerships by country. The Ibero-American Observatory on Television Fiction, OBITEL, data is helpful, but offers only a partial snapshot of the fiction format segment as it quantifies ‘co-production’ activity by country for Latin American countries, the United States Hispanic market, Portugal and Spain. This makes it difficult to discern who the players are at the country level in any systematic way. Because of the ‘slippery’ nature of cataloguing shifting business arrangements associated with the format business, I realize this may be difficult, if not impossible, but it is worth considering since tracking other types of partnership/collaboration arrangements at the level of corporations may reveal different

patterns of investment and trade at the regional level⁹⁴. It would be helpful to have financial data, but within the context of privately-owned media, I'm almost certain this information would be difficult to obtain.

Another topic for further research would be independent media production in Latin America. It would be helpful to understand how these fields of production are evolving in light of national (government and private industry) initiatives and global industry opportunities and challenges. The lack of research and public information on this topic contributes to perpetuating a perception that the barriers to entry are insurmountable given the power and reach of global and regional powerhouses. It might also be helpful to compare and contrast the rise of independent production in Colombia and Argentina, for example, and in reference to other countries 'in the margins' such as Israel.

Finally, a third, but perhaps even more important area for future research (and a limitation of this study) pertains to a more detailed study on the division of labor in Latin American television production. Juan Pinõn's most recent work (2014) has addressed this topic from a macro perspective, identifying new patterns of collaborations and transnational industrial structures of production, distribution, exhibition, and consumption across the region. But it would also behoove us to analyze these dynamics at the level of independent producers. As Vicki Mayer (2011) has pointed out, existing hierarchies in television production keep legions of professionals who work in the media

⁹⁴ It would be worth investigating what kind of data might be available through FRAPA, for example.

industry all but invisible⁹⁵. Most research and published information on television in Latin America continues to focus on professionals in the position to make financial, creative or management decisions in their respective organizations. However, as this study hints, much of the television production workforce in Argentina and Mexico depends on contract work, and on earnings that are determined by what individuals, in the position to make decisions, think is what 'the market will bear.' The critical analysis of television in this rapidly changing media environment requires that we continue to identify and evaluate the sites of struggle, contestation and negotiation in reference to the economic, regulatory, industrial, organizational, cultural and creative practices that impact production. All these suggested areas for future research carry important implications for policy development and the promotion of greater diversity of content in Latin American television within the context of a predominantly commercial media industry.

⁹⁵ Mayer uses the term in a deliberately broad sense to mean, essentially, anyone 'whose labor, however small, contributes to [television] production' (p. 179).

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Vita

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