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Transnational TV formats: Making the local visible and the global invisible

Jean K. Chalaby

From humble origins in the late 1940s, the global TV format trade has rapidly expanded over recent years to become an estimated €3.1 billion industry (FRAPA 2009: 17).

Between 2006 and 2008, 445 formats led to 1262 adaptations in 57 territories (ibid: 11).

Formats might travel unnoticed but today represent a significant percentage of the broadcasters' schedule worldwide. Most popular shows these days are formatted and cover all TV genres from daytime cookery and decorating shows to prime time talent competition blockbusters.

The reasons behind this entertainment revolution are multiple and have been detailed elsewhere (Chalaby 2011, 2012). In an age of fierce competition, TV formats enable broadcasters to offer local programming – always the audience favourite – whilst managing risk (with the knowledge that the same concept has a proven track record in other markets) and driving down costs (through the progressive refinement of the production model). Another key reason for the success of formats is the particular way they combine the local and the global.

Formatted shows follow rules that are applied across borders, although the level of application differs from one genre to the next. The format points of game shows tend to be fixed, while factual entertainment formats allow for greater flexibility. The branding of TV shows also tends to be global. However, the role these rules play in formats must be carefully thought through. Fans go to football games to support their local teams, not to see how FIFA Rules & Regulations are applied (although they are quick to complain when they think they are not). Likewise, the rules of a format are put in place to weave narratives, and disappear behind the stories they generate. In the same way that FIFA

rules provide the structure for a thrilling (hopefully) encounter between two local teams, a format works as a platform on which to generate drama. Formats may be international to the industry but they are always local to the audience. Good formats are successful internationally only if they resonate with an audience in each and every market in which they air. Thus even the most formulaic quiz show can have a dramatic impact. More than half-a-century ago, the immensely popular *Lascia o Raddoppia?* contributed to Italy's linguistic and cultural unification. According to Chiara Ferrari, the list of questions, which touched on Italian arts, literature, history, football and opera, 'certainly created among the Italian people the sense of sharing a common heritage and common passions' (Ferrari 2012: 137). The show was presented by Mike Bongiorno (who went on to become one of Italy's most-emblematic figures of the second-half of the 20th century), and it is claimed, argues Ferrari, that 'Italians have learned their language thanks to Mike's Italian rather than Dante's Italian', and that early television played an important role 'in unifying the country linguistically' (ibid: 142). *Lascia o Raddoppia?* even had an impact on the school curriculum, which was reformed once ministers noticed contestants' inability to answer the simplest of questions (ibid).

It does not matter that *Lascia o Raddoppia?* was an adaptation (probably illegal) of *The \$64,000 Question* (ibid; see also Grasso 2004: 43-50). What is important is that this show acted as a platform for Italian culture, and on this occasion was so relevant that it contributed to its unification. TV formats may be transnational in the sense that they travel and incorporate cross-border rules, but essentially, they apply these rules to create characters and fashion stories that resonate locally. In this sense, they make the local visible and the global invisible.

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