

The Logic of Formatting: A Case Study on Transnational Television Production

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Abstract

The transnationalization of television production has been examined by studies on formats and multinational media companies, which have often highlighted the resilience of the local in the global. This article investigates transnationalization on the microlevel of television production, drawing on participant observations in a Dutch production company that is partly owned by an American conglomerate. It explores the deep entanglement of the local with the global in different facets of production – including legal, organizational, and market aspects – as manifested in daily practices and decision making in television production. Our analysis reveals an industrial logic of formatting that is not only induced by transnational ownership structures and business models but also deeply ingrained in production routines and programme conventions. Through this logic, transnationalization shapes media professionals' daily work, the selection of programme ideas, and the process of content development.

Keywords:

Transnationalization, Transnational television, Television production, TV formats, Production studies, Ethnography

The debate on television globalization, triggered by the import of foreign programming during the 1980s and 1990s, has shifted to a debate on the *transnationalization* of television *production*. The 'transnational shift' into a 'post-national broadcasting environment' draws on the rise of multinational television channels, the trade in formats, and production

companies operating in multiple countries (Chalaby 2009; Esser 2002). Transnationalization, used instead of globalization, suggests more complex relations between the global and the local, which are amply demonstrated by research on television formats and transnational media companies. Format studies have highlighted how global formats are adapted to local audiences' cultural preferences and market specificities (Oren and Shahaf 2012; Waisbord and Jalfin 2009). Research on transnational media corporations has demonstrated global–local network structures and the need to collaborate with local companies and producers because of their knowledge of the local audience, culture, and market (Chalaby 2009; Fernández-Quijada 2013). Despite global ownership structures and the global trade in formats, production processes and daily routines are thought to remain localized, for example because personal connections play a crucial role in the industry and because creative processes such as idea development are locally embedded (Chalaby 2016; Doyle and Barr 2019; Esser 2016). Hence, the resilience of local or national markets, policies, media systems, and cultures is emphasized. However, as Appadurai (1996: 42) has argued, we must be wary of such claims, as the emphasis on locality 'becomes a fetish that disguises the globally dispersed forces that actually drive the production process'.

The use of transnationalization as a concept is an attempt to overcome the dichotomy between 'the global' and 'the local' that has stifled the globalization debate (Kuipers 2011). Global–local thinking, however, remains persistent (Havens 2020), and much research has been devoted to demonstrating the persistence of the local in the global. In addition to underlying cultural essentialism, national imaginaries and the dichotomization of global economy and local culture (Esser 2014; Shahaf 2007), methodological shortcomings seem to contribute to an (over)emphasis on locality. Text-based programme-specific format studies have highlighted the reproduction of national and cultural identities in local adaptations while ignoring the inherently transnational context in which they are produced (Esser 2014; Müller

2011; Oren 2012). The few production studies investigating the implications of transnational ownership structures or the format trade have relied on interviews with industry executives, who have underscored the advantages of foreign takeovers, the positive impact of format adaptation, and their creative autonomy (Chalaby 2016; Keinonen 2018; Doyle and Barr 2019). Stressing their localness and denying the impact of foreign ownership and the constraints of format production, however, are in the interests of producers and a feature of strategic management discourses (van Keulen et al. 2020). Interviews with industry members thus do not provide a complete picture of transnationalization but rather corroborate the notion of the resilient local in the global. Yet, the concentration of ownership and the transnationalization of media markets shape the daily lives of people working in media organizations (Havens 2014).

This study aims to explore the meaning of transnationalization on the microlevel of television production. In other words, we aim to answer the question: *how* does transnationalization shape the daily work of media professionals? Participant observations at a Dutch production company financed by a large international player in the television industry, combined with interviews with the firm's professionals, shed light on the entanglement of the local with the global in the contemporary transnational television industry – an entanglement so thorough, we argue, that both 'the local' and 'the global' are inadequate, and perhaps obsolete, concepts.

Global + Local = Transnational?

Television has been historically caught between globalizing forces such as international distribution and localizing forces such as regulation and cultural references, but the two tendencies have slowly been harmonized (Havens 2020). Despite the use of the term *transnationalization*, however, the global–local dichotomy still informs our understanding of

television (Havens 2020). Transnationalization, then, seems to be a concept functioning at an instrumental level, used to avoid the pitfalls of the globalization discourse and to alert the reader that one is aware of the global–local interplay, but not to investigate this interplay or harmonization in particular.

While the rise of global media conglomerates has led to concerns about control over local production and the implications for programming, some authors have stated that takeovers and international ownership in the television industry have little or no direct impact on creative processes and content (Doyle and Barr 2019). Transnational production companies are conceptualized as ‘a federation of local producers’, with each focusing on its own national market with its own creative vision, and with international synergies being limited to funding and information about industry trends (Fernández-Quijada 2013). Others, however, see a foreign investor as ‘an active agent in shaping and originating program ideas’ (O’Regan and Potter 2013: 13). In addition to tighter profit demands, concentration of ownership may cause cultural changes in production companies as well as a stronger focus on the international – instead of a domestic – market when developing new programming (Esser 2016). Within transnational production networks, adapting and developing international formats are encouraged, and production practices are coordinated across borders (Keinonen 2018; van Keulen et al. 2020).

In general, whether part of a conglomerate or not, television producers are increasingly looking for international partnerships, chasing international recognition, and focusing on exportable genres and content that appeals to international markets (Doyle and Barr 2019; O’Regan and Potter 2013; Shahaf 2016; Zoellner 2009). As broadcasters, production companies, and distributors become ‘more oriented to global agendas’, ‘the instruments and vehicles for the development of programming become globalized from within’, making ‘transformations in the national production space evident in local content’

(O'Regan and Potter 2013: 6). Transnational integration can be expected to cause the prioritization of certain genres and narratives (Baltruschat 2010), with 'issues that are only of national interest or are too complex or contentious to work internationally' no longer considered for production (Esser 2016: 3605). Hence, global standardization of the institutional shape of television could cause 'a shift in the logic of programming' (Oren 2012: 375).

Format production exemplifies transnationalization, as it is embedded in both global and local practices and constraints (Oren and Shahaf 2012). Format studies, however, have mainly focused on demonstrating the localness of specific format adaptations, highlighting the process of localization and the representation of national culture and identity (Oren 2012). Nonetheless, formats can alter the conventions of creative production and reorient television production cultures, as format adaptation involves the international transfer of production knowledge and imported format elements are incorporated in local productions (Ganguly 2019). Moving away from the focus on the impact of format importation and adaptation, Oren (2012) has argued that formats provide new models of content development. Hence, to understand their radical potential, 'we must explore the practice of formatting as a fundamental process for television content development even before transnational transfer takes place' (Shahaf 2016: 248).

The increase in formatted content cannot be separated from the rise of a cosmopolitan industry elite (Oren 2012). In general, international relations, experiences, and orientations are playing an increasing role in media work and production cultures (Müller 2011). More specifically, a generation of television producers has started to think about television in similar ways; they increasingly value foreign success and share professional standards, styles, and sensibilities (O'Regan and Potter 2013; Kuipers 2012; Waisbord 2004). At least on a management level, television professionals across the world operate as 'a cohort of like-

minded colleagues' (Keinonen 2018: 165). Their similar perceptions contribute to the standardization and delocalization of television in a much more powerful way than programme flows, the trade in formats, or global ownership structures have done thus far (Havens 2006; Esser 2014; Keinonen 2018).

Combining the insights from previous studies, the concentration of ownership and the transnationalization of media markets provide producers with challenges and opportunities and shape media professionals' daily activities, business practices, production routines, and television programme conventions (Baltruschat 2010; Havens 2014; Straubhaar 2007). Production processes are deeply embedded in both the global and the local; people in television industries – especially in format-exporting countries – simultaneously negotiate globalized conditions and local constraints (Shahaf 2016). While this negotiation seems to be at the core of transnationalization, occurring 'on the ground' (Shahaf 2007) and shaping the output of the television industry, little is known about daily practices and decision making in television production, the work and identities of television professionals, and the process of programme development: 'More work is needed to explore the international dimensions of media production in more detail' (Paterson et al. 2016: 8). Therefore, our study focuses on the microlevel of television production.

Case study

This study adopts a production studies perspective and uses an independent television production company in the Netherlands as a case study. Focusing on one individual media organization enables production researchers to relate the company's industrial configuration and strategic objectives to decision making, daily processes and practices, and output (Lotz and Newcomb 2012). The studied production company, referred to as 'Prodco' for reasons of anonymity, was created by two Dutch television executives together with an American media

conglomerate as the third owner. Since the boom of the trade in reality formats, the Netherlands has been the world's third leading format exporter after the United Kingdom and the United States (Chalaby 2016). The majority of the production companies in the Netherlands have been taken over by foreign companies and are part of transnationally operating networks, not least because of their reputation in the international format market. Prodco was created as part of a media production and distribution conglomerate (called 'MoCo' from here onwards) that did not yet have any presence outside the United States. Prodco focused from the start on producing non-scripted content for multiple markets, including Belgium and Luxembourg. In line with the strategy of several US conglomerates (see Esser 2016), MoCo hoped to gain access to European markets and newly developed formats by investing in a Dutch production company. Prodco is, in this respect, an atypical case as it was not an established, successful company taken over by a global player, which can counter the impact of foreign ownership (Doyle and Barr 2019). Additionally, Prodco did not become part of a decentralized transnational network in which multiple companies each focused on their own national market. Instead, Prodco is a 'born-transnational' company and thus provides a relevant case for a contextualized exploration of how transnationalization materializes 'on the ground'.

Data was collected during ten weeks of participant observations conducted by the first author of this article in the summer of 2018, a few months after the company was founded. Due to the company's recent founding, daily practices were largely directed towards developing ideas, preparing broadcaster pitches, and selling shows as soon as possible in order to survive. The small scale and start-up phase of the company also provided the observer with the opportunity to obtain access, to speak to all employees, and to follow all projects. Brainstorms, casting processes, and desk research on potential programme topics were observed and participated in. For example, the observer was sent into the field to recruit

participants for one of the formats developed. Participant observations provided several advantages compared to interviews, such as more openness, access to documents and internal communication, contact with freelance workers, and insight into actual processes and practices. The observations were alternated with formal and informal interviews that yielded data on underlying strategies and motivations, experiences and explanations, and processes and decisions that were out of sight of the researcher. Next to the two owners/directors (one creative director and one business director), four freelance editors/researchers worked at the company when the fieldwork started. By the time the research ended, that figure had grown to seven freelancers.

To examine the transnationalization of television production, we used Peterson and Anand's (2004) six-facet model for analysing cultural production. While criticized for paying little attention to the operation of power at either a macro- or micro-level (Havens et al. 2009), their approach has the merit of (1) understanding production as the combination of influencing factors, each playing a significant role and having a distinct impact on the end product; and (2) identifying these factors or facets (e.g., market, technology, law and regulation, industry structure, organizational structure, and occupational career). Rather than (in)validating the theoretical implications of this model, we borrowed the six facets as entry points to make sense of the rich but messy contextual details of ethnographic data. In this process, the model provided an analytical lens to explore how transnationalization shapes everyday production practices, transcending the focus on one element such as ownership and paying attention to the interplay of local and global dimensions in each facet of production.

Transnational production of culture

As a television production company, Prodco is truly transnational: its *raison d'être* is the transnationalization of the television industry and the format trade, as without these MoCo

would have had no desire to finance a new production company in the Netherlands. Accordingly, the transnationalism of television production manifested itself in each of the six facets with a local and global component so intertwined that distinguishing between the two was difficult and even seemed pointless. For example, transnationalization appeared to be not only a top-down process with a global conglomerate influencing a local production company, but also a bottom-up process in which the ‘local’ production company reached out and adapted to the global. Although we are not the first to note that the global and the local are mutually constructive, we argue that they cannot be logically distinguished or separated anymore. Rather, a different dynamic – which we will call ‘format logic’ – affects media professionals’ daily work. In particular, production companies like Prodco, which specializes in the creation of television formats, are the embodiment of transnationalization. This became apparent for each of the six facets: technology, law and regulation, industry structure, organization structure, occupational career, and market. As Peterson and Anand (2004) have emphasized, each of these facets is tightly related to the others so that changes in one facet always impact the other facets. For our analysis, this means that what we observed in one facet was always related to, and often overlapped with, what we could observe for another facet.

Technology

Technological developments have accelerated the spread of cultural products over the globe. Currently, in television production, high-capacity Internet networks and high-speed data transfer technology have a direct impact on the daily practices of media professionals (Chalaby 2020). Most substantial for Prodco was communication with MoCo and other international partners, as well as access to global market research, trade platforms, viewer data, and, more mundanely, the wealth of programmes available as a source of inspiration.

Prodco's perceptions of global trends and broadcaster preferences were largely framed by the international trade press, format trade markets, and commissions and audience ratings in the United Kingdom. For example, the success of the reality show *Love Island* (2015-present) incentivized the creative director to develop a similar show. He argued that 'This guilty pleasure type of programming is doing very well in the United Kingdom, so if it works in the United Kingdom then it will work everywhere – or well, in all the important TV countries'. As the United Kingdom remains the global format production centre, successful programming from the United Kingdom provided the Dutch producers with indicators for potential success useful to convince local broadcasters. At the time of the observations, two 'guilty pleasure reality shows' were developed and pitched to Dutch and foreign broadcasters, as well as to online platforms. Moreover, Prodco's managers scanned newsletters from distributors and trade organizations on a daily basis, and browsed YouTube to find topics, formats, and talent that could reach local as well as global audiences.

Obviously, without the Internet, all this would be impossible. We would like to emphasize, however, that it is not so much the technology's affordances that are of importance, but the daily practices. Much of Prodco's daily activities, such as pitching to a broadcaster and deciding which programme ideas would be further developed, were directly informed by access to international ratings, trends, and programming. As a Dutch production company owned by a US-based conglomerate, Prodco aimed for both an international and a national market, and was most inspired by programmes produced in the United Kingdom. This particular situation also resonated in the laws and regulations that Prodco encountered.

Law and regulation

Transnationally situated, Prodco encountered laws and regulations in different ways and on multiple levels. For example, Prodco had to deal with not only international intellectual

property (IP) law and the contract with MoCo, but also with national laws and regulations. MoCo's investment in Prodco was primarily based on its desire to distribute newly developed formats. This was formalized in an agreement that 50 per cent of Prodco's yearly turnover had to be generated by self-developed programming, thus materialized in exploitable IP rights. Consequently, there was an explicit focus on developing non-scripted formats with the potential to sell to other territories and that preferably could work in the US market as well. As one of the directors mentioned in an interview:

International distribution is very interesting because, well, then money comes in without having to do anything for it. For MoCo, it is an important reason to invest in our company [...], so in the objectives of this company, it is very important that we develop ideas with international potential of which we keep the distribution rights.
(Business director) ¹

The focus on format development and international distribution forced Prodco to think about IP rights. While it is impossible to legally protect general creative ideas or single programme elements, according to the Format Recognition and Protection Association, 'a unique combination of elements that create a distinct narrative' can be protected (FRAPA 2020). During observations of the development process as well as in the interviews, we encountered the industry term *hard format*, which was used to describe a clearly structured – and thereby legally protectable and sellable – programme idea. The term was used as the opposite of *soft format*, which referred to all non-scripted programming based on the registration or reconstruction of real events, but without 'format rules' or a so-called format engine (Keane and Moran 2008) generating a distinctive narrative and making a show

¹ All interview quotations are translated from Dutch to English by the authors.

exploitable as IP. Ideas for non-scripted television shows were often simply classified as either format or documentary. Because ‘soft formats’ or ‘documentaries’ are vulnerable to theft, they were considered less attractive development projects.

The legal softness of documentaries also appeared during the adaptation of a British documentary series by Prodco. The series did not contain a unique combination of programme elements that would be recreated, but Prodco wanted to re-use the programme idea and the title. The owners expected that it would be easier to sell an adaptation of an existing programme, especially because the British original had already been broadcast in the Netherlands, meaning that the broadcaster would know what to expect. Because the creative director had a personal connection with the British executive producer of the show, Prodco had the opportunity to pitch the idea. As soft formats cannot be clearly protected as IP, however, the directors tried to bypass paying a license fee. They argued: ‘It is a documentary series; in principle, it is not a format. I told [distributor] that we are not going to pay a license fee for that’. However, to maintain good relations and their reputation internationally, they eventually had to pay the fee:

I know [executive producer] very well, and you *could* see it as a format; it has no rigid structure, but we do use [the title], the topic, and the approach [...] Also, we have been formally in contact with [distributor] for months now, so we can’t go back anymore. (Creative director)

In another case, which involved a British factual programme that had not been broadcast in the Netherlands and of which Prodco changed the title, no contact with the original creators was established, no format fee was paid, and the company owners openly admitted (to co-workers) that they had stolen the idea.

Another development project during the observation period demonstrated different legal complexities in terms of working transnationally. Developing a competition reality show in which veterinarians would travel to and work in the United States, the team encountered a problem: obtaining work permits for all the participants seemed extremely difficult. The production manager had the idea of working around this obstacle by using tourist visas, declaring to the visa intermediary office that the participants would not actually work in the United States, but ‘just make a TV show’. However, during a management update, MoCo heard about this procedure, feared legal consequences, and immediately intervened, instructing the production team to search for other, legal, options. Somewhat upset, the production manager explained, ‘[MoCo] doesn’t want to be associated with this, but look [pointing at the company flag outside with the MoCo logo], of course they will be associated with it’. This example illustrates encounters with not only international law, but also with international differences in manoeuvring the law and organizational aspects of transnationalization that impact production cultures, practices, and decisions.

Finally, national law was equally important. Prodco attempted to adapt a British documentary series on minors that had committed a murder, but in the subsequent development process, local constraints soon emerged: the privacy of juvenile offenders is strongly safeguarded in Dutch law. Experts are not allowed to talk about individual cases, and tabloids in the Netherlands explore these sensitive issues much less deeply than their British counterparts. Details from police documents and footage of court cases used in the original version seemed impossible to obtain in the Netherlands. Other concerns arose around the cooperation of the convicts’ and the victims’ family members, legal risks for the production company, and the company’s reputation. Working around these constraints meant adjusting the format significantly, and the project was finally abandoned.

Each example shows how Prodco had to navigate a complex field of laws and regulations. In particular, international distribution rights had a direct impact on which programme ideas succeeded and which did not. The intertwining of the global and the local was further highlighted by the organizational structure of Prodco, which was informed by the organization of the television industry in more general terms.

Industry structure

Prodco is part of what is today known as the transnational television industry. As discussed, MoCo considered Prodco as a point of entry into European markets and the format trade. Its investment did not come without any obligations: 50 per cent of the production had to be ‘formatted’ for IP exploitation in the international market. Additionally, as we have seen, international connections played an important role in finding programme ideas. Yet, Prodco was not solely a subsidiary working for the mother company and not completely disconnected from its local context. Although Prodco was not yet an established company in the Dutch market, both directors and the professionals employed by them were deeply embedded in the television industry in the Netherlands (and some in neighbouring countries). Moreover, Dutch broadcasters, hoping to attract Dutch audiences, were the most important clients. In this way, Prodco found itself in a complex transnational power play, simultaneously depending on MoCo, international connections, and Dutch broadcasters. While MoCo had the power to intervene in projects under development and while format adaptations depended on international relations, idea development and decision making were strongly guided by the company’s dependence on (local) broadcasters (see Zoellner 2009).

The adaptation of the British documentary series demonstrated the complexity of the transnational industry and the interplay between national and international actors, goals, relationships, and demands. Although it did not generate exploitable IP, for Prodco, this

project was interesting because it provided an opportunity to showcase itself as a reliable production partner to Dutch broadcasters. For the British producer (also the programme's presenter), a Dutch adaptation of the show would result in international visibility. For the distributor, it would generate international sales and format fees. From the perspective of the Dutch broadcaster, an adaptation was interesting because the concept had proven itself before and it could conduct audience research using the British original before commissioning a local version. After pitching the idea, Prodco received the feedback that, among other things, the broadcaster wanted a different – local – host. Using the original presenter would not only entail additional costs but also result in English interviews and create a feeling of distance from the audience. For independent producers, tailoring a programme to the commissioning editor's taste and closing the deal are the highest priorities (Zoellner 2009) – and so a local host was found – but the directors were anxious about telling the original presenter and possibly harming international relations.

On the one hand, Prodco was forced to think in IP due to its ownership structures, which are common in the contemporary television industry. Its business model is shaped along international standards. On the other hand, Prodco needed to sell shows, had to strengthen its position in the local market, and was equally impacted by local broadcasters whose demands were not only increasingly elaborated but also increasingly based on (international) audience research and market information.

Organization structure

Being a small company with no clear-cut division of labour, Prodco could be labelled as having an 'entrepreneurial form' (Peterson and Anand 2004: 316). Two directors managed the company, and each had longstanding experience at several multinational production groups in the Netherlands. All other professionals were freelance workers. The international

and national experiences of both directors and the other professionals marked the transnational character of Prodco. Whereas the directors were accustomed to operating in multinational environments, the freelancers were highly dependent on their Dutch networks for jobs.

During the observations, a distinction between the two directors and the freelance personnel (editors, researchers, producers) became apparent; the two levels largely operated separately, with a coordinating senior editor as an intermediary. While the directors dealt with MoCo, setting out a transnational strategy and orientation, and finding and selling formats internationally, these activities barely reached the work floor. For the most part, the freelancers did not come into contact with people from MoCo and did not seem to be aware that Prodco was part of MoCo. Sometimes they were not sure if the programme they were working on was an adaptation of an international format, and they had no idea which programme ideas were being developed and pitched by the two directors. This situation was partly caused by the company's core business and organizational structure: in finding and selling new ideas, corporate secrecy is essential. Short-term contracts and the fact that freelancers hop from one project to another means that they are not entrusted with corporate strategies and creative ideas that could become global hit formats.

The 'tourist visa affair' in which MoCo displayed its power not only demonstrated how foreign ownership, exceptionally but concretely, can reach the 'ground level' and touch producers' work, but also emphasized the local facet. After the event, the directors clarified that MoCo was worried about the legal risks, and they instructed their employees to 'do everything formally and officially from now on'. Interestingly, this moment was also a turning point for the freelancers, who realized that MoCo's ownership was of importance. Afterwards, the freelancers started asking questions such as the following: Had MoCo set any targets or time limits for the company? Could MoCo cancel ongoing projects? Who was

responsible for communication with MoCo, and what did MoCo want to know about them? Until the incident with the visas, the professionals had not been aware of the company's ownership and the implications for them. Although this fact might be surprising, as one may expect professionals to feel pride in working for such a large and famous conglomerate, it is not if one takes into account the local aspects of their careers.

Occupational career

The two directors and the seven freelancers whose daily practices were observed can be marked as transnational professionals, even though the freelancers were unaware of their employment by MoCo. All nine people had built specific expertise in producing formats. While the two directors had former experience as format creators and were involved in the international format business, the freelance researchers, editors, and casting directors had also mostly worked on formatted programming, whether as creations or adaptations.

Prodco's creative director had made a name as the first full-time format developer for a large transnational production network based in the Netherlands, essentially concerned with developing non-scripted formats to be distributed and produced internationally. Since then, he had attended every format trade fair, appeared in the newsletter of trade platform C21Media as one of the protagonists in the format sector, and built an extensive international personal network. Being responsible for programme idea development, the creative director seemed to think in formats; he automatically shaped any topic that arose during brainstorm (or lunch) into a format, either by 'putting rules on the idea' (Oren 2012) or by pushing it into the structure of an existing format. Zoellner (2009) has argued that producers grow up in a certain context that shapes their expectations, routines, and programme conventions. The career of Prodco's creative director illustrated the rise of a generation of television professionals who were educated in transnational format-producing corporations and have an

ingrained international orientation, which accelerates the transnationalization of production and audiovisual texts (Havens 2006; Keinonen 2018). While the importance of personal contacts in the television business on a local level (e.g., to gain access to broadcasters) can be expected to mitigate the power of global conglomerates and their impact on local industries (Esser 2016), we observed the transnationalization of personal networks, which breaks down such local filters and opens up local industries from within. As further discussed below, an international network enabled Prodco to pitch programme ideas in foreign markets.

The business director, however, while also having worked in transnational production companies, was less interested in the international market and seemed to distance himself from the fixation on formats – which actually demonstrated the almost unavoidable centrality of formats in the television industry. He mentioned that he preferred to read local newspapers and magazines rather than trade news, ‘to feel what is happening here and now’, in order to find inspiration for new programme ideas. He downplayed the influence of MoCo on Prodco’s activities and attenuated the formal agreements with MoCo: ‘I know that 50 per cent should be formatted, but we must grab all opportunities’. He somewhat derided ‘the nitty-gritty of formatting’ that his business partner seemed to enjoy and did not explicitly admit to enjoying international recognition. Moreover, his activities largely consisted of meetings with local broadcasters and presenters that could result in collaborations, activities that were strongly embedded in the local context. Nevertheless, he also attended international trade markets, had regular conference calls with MoCo managers, managed the business’s financial situation in close collaboration with them, valued ‘keeping them happy’, and described selling a show in the United States as possibly a producer’s highest achievement.

The freelance workers, on the other hand, focused full time on finding (local) stories, candidates, experts, and information to realize productions and satisfy the wishes of broadcasters. Moreover, the freelancers were concerned with strengthening their professional

networks, which were highly embedded in the Dutch market, and their reputations to secure their next projects. Though the international television market and MoCo seemed largely absent in their daily practices (apart from the ‘visa affair’), they also encountered ‘moments of transnationalization’. For example, a consultancy call was organized with British producers of a format that was considered for adaptation, during which two Dutch editors were present. Such a call was clearly not a daily occurrence, as they were nervous and carefully prepared their questions in English. While debriefing the call, they were surprised at how much time their British colleagues spent on pre-producing the show, but they copied that approach anyway and incorporated the advice. Another ‘moment of transnationalization’ took place in the post-production process of a series produced for TLC, a transnational channel owned by Discovery. A young post-production assistant had to translate materials such as episode synopses, casting profiles, and rights clearances into English and deliver them to Discovery because TLC had, following the Discovery group’s policy, commissioned the show including all international rights. This task involved a great deal of extra administrative work (and frustration), as TLC had requested documents and information with which the Dutch creators were not familiar. In yet another project, while developing a series for the transnational channel Insight TV, the directors had to put together a production team that was fluent in English to ensure easy communication with the commissioner. Hence, producing for transnational broadcasters required real adjustments in the daily routines, practices, and skills of the freelance producers.

Market

The harmonization of global and local dimensions probably manifested itself most clearly in the market facet of Prodco’s activities. While its aim, as dictated by global and local strategic objectives, was to produce formats suitable for the international market, Prodco’s survival

was equally dependent on the local market. The simultaneous focus on both markets – and the expectations that Prodco’s production teams had about them – played a crucial role in idea development processes.

Following the workers’ experiences, the national market had become more difficult over the years; a logic of safety was more emphatic than ever. Whereas broadcasters would previously greenlight a project after a good pitch and some negotiations, broadcasters now want to see every detail of a show fully developed before making a final decision on commissioning (also see Zoellner 2009). The development and commissioning trajectories observed were indeed complex, extensive, and expensive, with insecure outcomes. Along with the imposed agreement with MoCo about IP rights, these difficulties seemed to support the convention of formatting and international distribution to achieve a return on the investment.

Both directors described international sales as ‘always the ultimate goal’. The primary concerns for the company in the start-up phase, however, were to pay the bills, survive, and strengthen its position in the national market. Therefore, at this stage, Prodco focused on adapting existing formats and developing one-off content as well. However, all these actions were considered important mainly to improve the company’s chances internationally:

For now, we are building a foundation; we definitely *think* about [international distribution], but it’s also important to just sell our shows [locally]. Of course, it is always on our mind. But, for example, [adapted format] is of no use to us; that is just a Dutch production, but we don’t own the rights. We do that just to produce something and to show the world how well we do that. But, of course, in everything we develop ourselves, we make sure – or at least our goal is international. (Creative director)

To increase Prodco's chances of success, ideas for the national and international market were developed simultaneously. Ideally, programme ideas developed for, and sometimes in collaboration with, a local broadcaster were also suitable for international distribution, either as an adaptable format or as a finished tape. Hence, during the process of preparing a pitch for a Dutch broadcaster, the international market was also present. During the observations, the creative director explained, 'I am working on something; it is not a format, but it is interesting. What I want is some kind of docusoap about the Vatican because it is a tape that can be sold everywhere'. When developing ideas for local broadcasters, the channel's identity, target audience, and envisioned place in the schedule played an important role. Ideas were customized, or at least superficially shaped to the broadcaster's wants and needs – and sometimes even to individual commissioning editors' tastes. For example, during a meeting, the directors of Prodco saw a book about fishing in the commissioning editor's office, which triggered the development of a fishing competition format that was also considered to have international potential. Sometimes, however, broadcasters' wishes collided with the focus on the international market, for example when a commissioning editor asked for a documentary approach instead of a format approach.

In development for the international market, without a specific broadcaster in mind, idea development was based on international market trends, on topics that were considered universally attractive (such as dating, soccer or the Vatican), and above all, on successful shows in the United Kingdom. During the development of a format inspired by YouTube videos in which organ donors and receivers meet each other, the legal impossibility of making the show in the Netherlands soon became apparent. This factor was not considered a problem; it was just a matter of finding a broadcaster or platform in another market where it would be possible to sell and produce the show. In general, if local broadcasters were not

interested in a new idea at a particular moment but Prodco's managers believed in its international potential, they would try to find a foreign broadcaster that would be willing to take the risk of being the first to produce the format – in exchange for IP rights. This demonstrates Prodco's inherent transnationalism, encouraged by an attempt to become less dependent on a few broadcasters in the national market. Moreover, it illustrates how formats do not necessarily spring from local resources and are not always produced for the local market first.

The producers' international networks were important for the role that market(s) played. Though the primary focus was on selling and producing in the Netherlands, Belgium and Germany were also target markets. Production companies usually do not produce for broadcasters in foreign countries because of the required knowledge about the local market and because commissioning to foreign production companies is not accepted, especially by public broadcasters. Hence, operating across borders entails certain difficulties that are generally thought to impose limitations on transnationalization. Yet, because the creative director had previously sold and coproduced his formats abroad, he had built personal relationships with broadcast executives, which made it possible to pitch ideas to them directly. Such personal connections in other countries were often established during former jobs in multinational conglomerates. While preparing a pitch for a Belgian broadcaster, the creative director explained:

Actually, a Belgian should come with me, but the pitch part I can do myself because I already know these people. If we are going to produce it, we need 'production Belgians' because otherwise that won't be accepted [...], but if there is an existing relationship, because I have sold them shows before or they are former colleagues who work at a broadcaster now, I can pitch everywhere. (Creative director)

Production companies and broadcasters in different markets are connected with and dependent on each other. They keep an eye on international trends and audience ratings of promising new shows launched elsewhere to decide whether to pursue a license. According to the business director, ‘It is important to follow international trends because broadcasters do that too’. At the time of the observations, a MoCo gameshow set in a large studio launched in the United States, and full preparations were made to distribute the format in Europe, where Prodco would function as the production hub. However, audience ratings of the first broadcast in the United States were not convincing, and the pitching strategies were immediately adjusted, as the chance for a commission would be low. Additionally, when discovering interesting formats in the international market, the managers of Prodco would sometimes deliberately wait for more (European) adaptations before pitching the idea to local broadcasters to increase their chances. In this way, foreign markets played a direct role in business decisions and the selection of programme ideas. Hence, the dependent broadcaster–producer relationship that largely guides idea development is further complicated by transnationalization; local commissions are influenced by events elsewhere, and television producers’ international connections, established through the format trade, mean that pitching and selling television programmes no longer only take place between local producers and local broadcasters, guided by the wants and needs of the latter.

Conclusion

In this study, we explored transnationalization on the microlevel of television production. Beyond a close intertwining and mutual construction of global and local dimensions in various facets of production, we found that in this part of the television industry, transnationalization implies a ‘logic of formatting’. Similar to the idea of genre working as an

‘active ingredient’ in media production that forms professional identities and belief systems, and that impinges on production norms and values (Alacovska 2016), formats were the alpha and the omega in television production within our case study. Formatting has become not only ‘a winning asset’ in the current transnational television industry but also the dominant mode of entertainment production (Oren and Shahaf 2012). Our analysis shows how the logic of formatting is induced by transnational ownership structures and business models, and also deeply ingrained in production conventions and daily routines. While technology functioned as a mere facilitator for transnational production, laws and regulations, industry and organizational structures, the target market, and occupational careers were all centred on formatting. Prodco’s activities and practices within each facet showed such deep entanglement of the global and the local that the individual concepts – even when assuming an interaction between the two – seem insufficiently explanatory.

Yet, we would like to draw attention to the specificity of our case. Prodco is not ‘just’ a production company; it is a small business that had just been founded under the wings of a US conglomerate and was focused on the development of non-scripted formats as its core business. This factor does not render our results invalid; rather, it suggests that the format industry is specific to the understanding of transnationalization. Our study demonstrates how not only the import of specific formats, but also the global format trade in general – and, above all, the possibility to *sell* and *distribute* formats in the global television market – impact daily decision making, practices, conventions, and routines in television production through the logic of formatting. Transnationalization is not only imposed on production industries, companies, workers and cultures in a top-down manner through concentration of ownership and international programme flows, but also is deeply rooted in industry beliefs and routines, producers’ professional identities, and programme conventions.

Using an ethnographic approach enabled us to look beyond formal interviews and trade press accounts and to expose and analyse the inner workings of an individual production company that operates in a transnational field. While producers rarely discuss their focus on the international market openly, within Prodco's walls such an international orientation appeared explicitly manifest in strategic objectives and creative decision making, as well as more implicitly ingrained in daily processes and practices. Hence, our results provide a sneak peek behind the scenes, even if limited to the production of non-scripted entertainment. Future research should focus on different production companies – large and small, dependent on and independent of international conglomerates, in different markets and media systems – to identify how transnationalization can be understood in different parts of the television industry.

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List of Television Programmes

Love Island (UK: ITV, 2015-present)

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