

Jean K. Chalaby



The Format Age

Television's Entertainment
Revolution

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JEAN K. CHALABY

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First published in 2016 by Polity Press

Polity Press
65 Bridge Street
Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Polity Press
350 Main Street
Malden, MA 02148, USA

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ISBN-13: 978-1-5095-0258-5

ISBN-13: 978-1-5095-0259-2(pb)

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Chalaby, Jean K.

The format age : television's entertainment revolution / Jean K. Chalaby.
pages cm. -- (Global media and communication)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-5095-0258-5 (hardcover : alk. paper) -- ISBN 1-5095-0258-0 (hardcover : alk. paper) -- ISBN 978-1-5095-0259-2 (pbk. : alk. paper) -- ISBN 1-5095-0259-9 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Television program genres. 2. Television programs--Social aspects. 3. Television and globalization. I. Title.

PN1992.55C47 2015

791.45'09--dc23

2015018308

Typeset in 11 on 13pt Adobe Garamond Pro by
Servis Filmsetting Ltd, Stockport, Cheshire
Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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The Format Age

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Myria Georgiou, *Media and the City*

Noha Mellor, Khalil Rinnawi, Nabil Dajani and Muhammad I.

Ayish, *Arab Media*

Shani Orgad, *Media Representation and the Global Imagination*

Stylianos Papathanassopoulos and Ralph Negrine, *European Media*

For Jane, my wife

Acknowledgements

In the process of researching this book, I was fortunate to receive support from many people. First, I would like to express my deep gratitude to all the interviewees for their time and cooperation (see full list of interviewees before the references at the end of the book). Their insights into the format business have been invaluable and my endeavour would not have been possible without their contributions, in particular those of the industry leaders that have opened doors for me and supported my work. I am also grateful to Dr Andrea Esser and Dr Gerd Hallenberger for help on Germany and Northern Europe, Professors Michele Hilmes and Tom O'Malley for insightful suggestions on early sound broadcasting adaptations, and Professor Gary Gerrefi for his expert comments on my global value chain analysis. Jane, my wife, expertly edited the manuscript and acted as a sounding board for my ideas, and I am indebted to her. I gratefully acknowledge Polity's anonymous readers for their constructive comments on the manuscript, and would like to thank Polity's editorial team, notably Andrea Drugan, who commissioned the work, Elen Griffiths and India Darsley, for their help throughout the publishing process, and Fiona Sewell for her wonderful support in the preparation of the manuscript. I am also grateful to Sheila Munton, City University London Library, Jeff Walden, BBC Written Archives Centre, the librarians at Radio France's Service Archives écrites et Musée, and my colleagues at City University London for the research leave that enabled me to finish this project. Last but not least, I would like to thank our three beautiful daughters, Felicity, Lucy and Jemima, for bearing with my absences during the final stages of this project.

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Introduction

There are many reasons why TV formats – shows that are adapted to local audiences – deserve our full attention. Following a quiet fifty-year period, the format revolution that came with the new millennium suddenly transformed a small commerce that was lying at the fringe of the TV industry into a global business. Today, hundreds of shows are adapted across the world at any one time, reaching a cumulative value (in terms of distribution and production fees) of several billion dollars per year. In Europe alone, the income that broadcasters have generated from the top 100 formats reached US\$2.9 billion in 2013 (*TBI Formats*, 2014a: 23). From a handful of companies in the 1990s, hundreds create, produce, distribute or acquire TV formats, with one firm alone, ITV Studios Global Entertainment, selling more than 4,300 hours' worth of format in 2013 (*TBI Formats*, 2014a: 23).

The impact of formats on television is manifold, starting with TV schedules. In Europe, eighty-four channels aired 28,386 hours of formats in 2013 (the equivalent of 338 hours per channel) (*TBI Formats*, 2014a: 23). It is estimated that around a third of primetime programmes scheduled by American and German commercial broadcasters has been bought or sold for adaptation (Esser, 2013). In many a market, the top-rating shows and innovative cross-platform programmes, from game shows to talent competitions, are often formats. And gone are the times when trade was limited to reality and light entertainment: fiction has caught up. Telenovelas, dramas, crime series and comedies have joined the format revolution and are being remade across borders.

The TV format business is deepening media globalization on several counts. It has added volume and complexity to international TV flows. Finished programming still travels well but the format business has spawned a new market for the intellectual property (IP) that lies within TV shows. It is furthering the transnational interdependence of TV firms across the world by leading to the formation of a trading system that is global in scope (chapter 4). The system has not only enabled the emergence of the first TV production majors (chapter 6), but connected local broadcasters to a global value chain. These broadcasters used to be entirely nation-bound: their market was heavily protected against foreign competition, they aimed at self-sufficiency (producing much of what they aired) and their few

suppliers were domestic (apart from the Hollywood studios). Today, even though they may still operate in a national market, they act as buyers in a global value chain and have many more international suppliers than in the past. They also make programming and scheduling decisions based on the ratings performance of shows in other territories.

Finally, the study of the TV format trade gives us an opportunity to shed light on the complex interaction between culture, globalization and capitalism. This book will argue that the TV format business can only be understood if economic history is taken into consideration, because the core engine of media globalization is the expansion of the capitalist world-system into IP trading. History partly explains why TV formats tend to travel on particular routes and why the format trading system reproduces features and patterns of earlier trades. History can also enlighten us on the likely cultural impact of TV formats, as their relationship with local cultures seems to follow patterns established by commodities made global by earlier trade routes.

Global media studies present many theoretical and methodological challenges. For several decades, the international communication field was suffused with methodological nationalism and its operating concepts were shaped by the politics of the nation-state. It was not so long ago that the exponents of the cultural imperialism thesis asserted that 'powerful forces have been trespassing over national boundaries on an unprecedented scale' and that 'the preservation of national sovereignty may be understood best as a step in the still larger struggle to break the domination of the world business system' (Nordenstreng and Schiller, 1979: ix and xii). Others pondered whether nations could retain control over television 'in the face of foreign broadcasting' (Negrine, 1988: 1). The institutions that commissioned international communication studies, such as UNESCO, were themselves a theatre of conflicting national interests and saw the world through the prism of the nation-state (Chalaby, 2007).

The discipline of international communication had to disentangle itself progressively from a nation-centric discourse. Once the myths of the cultural imperialism thesis were dispelled (e.g. Ang, 1985; Fejes, 1981; Liebes and Katz, 1993; Sinclair et al., 1996; Stevenson, 1984; Tomlinson, 1991; Tracey, 1985; Tunstall, 1977) a new paradigm could emerge, one less fearful of change and better equipped to face the complexities of global media. Attention began to be given to regional and transnational media flows (including those from the Global South to the West), the formation of hybrid cultures drawn from different locales, the phenomena of transnationalization and deterritorialization, and migrant media and transnational

audiences (e.g. Chalaby, 2009; García Canclini, 1995; Gillespie, 1995; Thussu, 2007; Tomlinson, 1999).

Despite considerable progress, some international communication scholars felt that the new globalization paradigm needed to be rooted in a firm theoretical basis. It is in this context that Ulrich Beck's cosmopolitan outlook began to be discussed, as illustrated by Robins and Aksoy:

We are interested in developments and possibilities that move us beyond the national frame. We would situate our research agenda in the context of the cosmopolitan project addressed by Ulrich Beck. . . . Like Beck, we recognize that, in social research, the shift away from methodological nationalism will require us to radically scrutinize the naturalized categories of modern social science, which has been very much *national* social science – categories that now exist as ‘zombie categories’ [Beck, 2002: 24]. For if one sees and thinks through a national grid, then one is always likely to see national things – and we will argue that a great deal of research on transnational phenomena does precisely this. (Robins and Aksoy, 2005: 15–16)

According to the late German sociologist, methodological nationalism fails to grasp the ramifications of the process of globalization, which ‘not only alters the interconnectedness of nation-states and national societies but the internal quality of the social’ (Beck, 2000: 87). ‘Political, economic and cultural action and their (intended and unintended) consequences know no border’ and thus the ‘challenge is to devise a new syntax, the syntax of cosmopolitan reality’ (Beck, 2006: 18). This syntax is a perspective – a ‘vision’ – that does not take for granted the congruence between national societies and economic, social and political realities that have acquired a transnational dimension and which transform these societies from within.

However, despite Beck's growing influence in international communication (e.g. Chalaby, 2009: 3; McCabe, 2013: 3), issues with the cosmopolitan outlook made it unsuitable for this study. Beck adopted a theoretical position that is normative in character and seeks to influence Europe's political future as much as to analyse globalizing processes. As noted by Victor Roudometof, the notion of cosmopolitanism and related concepts are ‘prescriptive terms’ that ‘engage in the process of simultaneously assessing a pervasive feature of modern life and proposing ways policy-makers should deal with this reality’ (Roudometof, 2005: 116). The problem with this discursive strategy is both epistemological and methodological, as it affects the objectivity of the interpretative perspective and the instruments with which the social is measured. Too often with Beck, the line is blurred between the social reality that is claimed to be interpreted and the reality that normative concepts imagine into being. Second, apart from wishing for a ‘pacifist and cosmopolitan capitalism’, Beck has remarkably

little to say about the economic dimension of globalization (Beck, 2005: 59–64).

An alternative theoretical framework was selected for this research that has to deliver on three objectives: to help us understand the historical evolution of the format trade, to explain the dynamic of the globalizing processes and to give insight into the commercial and industrial strategies of economic agents. This theoretical framework also needed to have the potential to make further contributions in international communication.

Whilst some of these objectives could be shared by political economists, deficiencies that lie at the core of their approach make it wholly unsuitable for the study of global media. As Nicholas Garnham, a pioneer of the political economy school, states: ‘much current PE [political economy] is underpinned by a crude and unexamined romantic Marxist rejection of the market per se, which has blocked analysis of how actual markets work and with what effects’ (Garnham, 2011: 42). A contribution was unlikely from an approach that ‘has become a euphemism for a vague, crude, and unself-questioning form of Marxism, linked to a gestural and self-satisfied, if often paranoid, radicalism’ (Garnham, 2011: 42).

This study, however, resides within a research tradition Garnham terms the ‘historical materialist analysis of the cultural sphere’ (Garnham, 2011: 41), and its theoretical underpinning is provided by a body of literature initially labelled global commodity chain (GCC) analysis, later evolving into global value chain (GVC) theory (Bair, 2009; Gereffi et al., 1994; Sturgeon, 2009). The benefits of the GVC approach will soon become apparent, but in short it gives us the possibility of understanding how the TV format trading system is organized at a global level and how the interplay between economic agents continuously reshapes it. It gives us an insight into the role of places and institutions, production patterns and trade routes, the power distribution within the TV format chain and the impact of regulation, national or otherwise. Above all, the GVC framework enables us to unfold the inner logic of media globalization and unveil one of its key engines. As the World Trade Organization (WTO) notes, as ‘companies divide their operations across the world, from the design of the product and manufacturing of components to assembly and marketing’, ‘international production networks or global value chains’ have become a mark of our times (WTO, 2013: 181). Today, trade within these chains is worth more than half the total value of non-fuel global exports: the WTO estimates that trade in intermediate goods was worth US\$7,723 billion in 2011, or 55 per cent of world non-fuel exports (WTO, 2013: 182–3). This book tells the story of the formation of a new trade and the creation of a new global value chain.

The GVC approach was developed by Gary Gereffi and colleagues but was initiated by Hopkins and Wallerstein (Hopkins and Wallerstein, 1986). As is well known, the father of world-systems theory was inspired by Fernand Braudel, who was also called upon to theorize the TV format trade as a transnational singular space (chapter 4). A fundamental methodological principle laid down by Braudel and the Annales School as a whole was also selected for this study: *l'observation concrète*, as he called it, comes before theory and ideology. While Braudel acknowledged the contribution of theoretical models, only a thorough empirical analysis of the observable reality, he argued, can reveal trends and patterns previously unnoticed. He contended that it is only after carefully studying the economic data and statistics of pre-industrial Europe that he noticed how little connection there was between this period and the grand theories that claimed to understand it (Braudel, [1967] 1992: 23). This basic principle is rarely observed in contemporary media studies, a discipline where academics too often appoint themselves judges of good taste and guardians of democracy.

The benefits of following this approach are extensive yet counter-intuitive. Lucien Febvre, the co-founder of the Annales School with Braudel, applied this method with spectacular success in his seminal *The Coming of the Book*. Febvre and co-author Martin (who carried out the project following Febvre's death) were among the first to understand how the advent of the printed book transformed the Western world and helped bring about modernity by augmenting available material and creating *un système perspectif nouveau* (Febvre, 1997: 10). But they also knew that printing was a fledgling industry and the printed book a commodity, and meticulously described how printers, authors, tradesmen and booksellers went about their business and how the whole industry developed across Europe, from printing workshops to book fairs.

As will be seen, TV formats are complex and multi-faceted products whose study benefits from a multi-disciplinary approach. Thus, this book complements the GVC framework with concepts borrowed from anthropology, sociology, management studies and narrative studies. It also draws from the body of literature on the creative industries (including texts from the earlier 'cultural industries' label), as this research aims to analyse the globalization of television in the wider context of rapid industrial and technological change that is happening across these industries (e.g. Flew, 2012, 2013; Garnham, 2005; Hesmondhalgh, 2013; Holt and Perren, 2009; Lacroix and Tremblay, 1997b; Kunz, 2007; Lotz, 2007; Miller, 2011; Winseck, 2012).

The book is organized in three parts: the first is devoted to the history of trade, the second to the format business in a global context, and the third to

TV formats themselves. Chapter 1 traces back the origins of the TV format trade, uncovering the world's first deals and identifying the first TV formats. Gathering evidence from previously unseen BBC written archives, this chapter shows how the key principles of the format business were established as early as the 1950s. It also contends that the TV format industry can be labelled an Anglo-American invention because the first format licences were exchanged between British and American broadcasters. Then, this chapter examines the next stage in the history of the trade and analyses how the 1978 Goodson Worldwide Agreement opened up the US game-show era.

The foundations of today's multi-billion-dollar industry that comes with trade bodies, awards ceremonies in Cannes, and formats that travel around the world at blazing speed and top ratings in fifty-plus territories were laid down in the 1990s. Chapter 2 examines the factors behind the TV format revolution that unfolded with the new millennium. How did the first super-formats sweep the world, and why did a fifty-year-old fringe activity become so central to the TV industry in the space of a few years? As always, profound changes were triggered by a powerful congruence of factors.

Although formats were crossing borders in growing numbers by the end of the 1990s, many TV executives needed the rise of the super-formats in order to take notice. Supported by exclusive interviews with their creators, chapter 3 tells the story of four exceptional formats that changed the face of television: *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?*, *Survivor*, *Big Brother* and *Idols*.

Part II begins with chapter 4, which offers an in-depth study of the formation of the *TV format trading system*. The chapter opens with an examination of the globalization of the trade in the 2000s, analysing the format traffic figures that reveal a complex trade flow. It also looks at the arrival of new firms in the business and the organizations, including market fairs, the trade press and trade associations, which support that system.

The chapter then focuses on the *global value chain* that lies at the system's core and which is the outcome of the process of *disintegration of production* that took place in the TV industry. The chapter determines the chain's input-output structure and scrutinizes its governance, examining the balance of power between buyers and suppliers. It then establishes the chain's geographical configuration, identifying three tiers of format exporters and the trade routes along which many formats travel. Then, considering the chain's institutional framework, this chapter argues that the format trade has begun to be protected by an embryonic international regulatory regime and that it stands on firmer legal ground than ever before. The viability of this trade rests almost entirely on the recognition of IP rights that are increasingly acknowledged by courts of law around the world.

A startling aspect of the TV format revolution has been the emergence

of a new trade leader: the UK. In a short timeframe, a country used to relying heavily on US imports has turned itself into the world's leading format exporter. Chapter 5 argues that the UK should be considered as the international benchmark for upgrading strategies in the TV content sector and posits the following question: can this process be duplicated elsewhere? This chapter assesses the upgrading strategies of those nations that have embarked on the journey from the local production of imports to the local creation of formats.

Chapter 6 analyses the modern *production* of TV formats, arguing that a new business model has emerged in recent years. In the early decades of the TV format trade, rights holders simply sold a show's licence to a local production company or broadcaster who would then adapt and produce it for a local audience. Many formats are still produced under licence but firms increasingly favour a new production model: wherever possible, rights holders prefer to adapt and produce their shows themselves in as many markets as possible, a strategy that has in turn led to the international expansion of TV production companies.

First, this chapter offers an overview of the international production model, tracing back its origins and exploring its development in recent years. It shows how it was pioneered by game-show producers before being adopted by British independent production companies and European broadcasters, and eventually by Hollywood studios. The chapter argues that this model is a key factor in the two recent waves of sector consolidation that led to the emergence of the first *international TV production majors*. The second part contextualizes it, arguing that TV production companies have had to adapt to the *globalization of the IP market* created by the format trading system. Using interviews with TV executives and creative leaders, this section reviews the risks and benefits associated with this model in terms of IP generation, exploitation and protection.

The final part of the book explores key contemporary trends in the TV format trade. Chapter 7 opens up with a brief analysis of the relationship between the format industry and TV genres, examining how the trade has progressed from game shows to reality to fiction. It then provides an overview of key formats in the game-show genre and across three reality strands: observational documentaries, factual entertainment and reality competitions. Close attention is paid to the narrative structure of these shows and, illustrating the argument with material gathered in interviews, this chapter explains how the TV industry has learnt to tell a story without a script.

Chapter 8 focuses on a key reality strand for the format trade: talent competitions. It analyses their narrative structure and, in order to understand their essence, it compares and contrasts them with hero myths from other