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# McTV

## Understanding the Global Popularity of Television Formats



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Globalization has intensified interconnectivity among television industries worldwide. Interconnectivity happens through structural and institutional linkages among television systems and industries worldwide, resulting in an increasingly integrated global business governed by similar practices and goals. The dynamics are reflected in the popularity of television formats. On the surface, global dissemination of formats may suggest not only the global integration of the economy of the industry but also the standardization of content. A dozen media companies are able to do business worldwide by selling the same idea, and audiences seem to be watching national variations of the same show. At a deeper level, however, formats attest to the fact that television still remains tied to local and national cultures. Bringing up examples of Latin American cases, this article argues that television is simultaneously global and national, shaped by the globalization of media economics and the pull of local and national cultures.

**Keywords:** *globalization; television programs; television formats; Latin America; media cultures*

**Back in the 1980s, global television** seemed headed toward becoming a “wall-to-wall Dallas,” as Hollywood’s domination of television screens was dubbed in Europe. In the context of profound changes in the structure of European television, such a prospect raised concerns about the future of national television and cultural imperialism amid the onslaught of U.S. media. Lately, it seems that global television is likely poised to be a “wall-to-wall format.” Around the world, television is filled with national variations of programs designed by companies from numerous countries. Formats are programming ideas that are adapted and produced domestically. The commerce of formats is not new. For decades, formats of “reality” and “fiction” programming have been produced and sold in international markets (Moran 1998). But, as the trade press has recently described it, “format

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television" has taken the industry by storm. In recent trade fairs, studio executives have pontificated about the virtues of formats and industry panelists have discussed the differences between formats of "reality" and "scripted" programs.

The popularity of formats is more than just another trend in an industry perennially hungry for hit shows and eager to follow them. It reveals two developments in contemporary television: the globalization of the business model of television and the efforts of international and domestic companies to deal with the resilience of national cultures. The analysis of these developments allows us to reexamine how economics and culture are related in the process of media globalization. In the first section of this article, I argue that when understood as a set of media policies and technological developments, globalization has intensified interconnectivity among television industries worldwide. Interconnectivity happens through structural and institutional linkages among television systems and industries worldwide. The result is the emergence of an increasingly integrated business governed by similar practices and goals. In the second section, I delve into what the popularity of television formats reflects about national cultures in a globalized world. On the surface, the global dissemination of formats may suggest not only the global integration of the economy of the industry but also the standardization of content. What better evidence of cultural homogenization than format television? A dozen media companies are able to do business worldwide by selling the same idea, and audiences seem to be watching national variations of the same show. At a deeper level, however, formats attest to the fact that television still remains tied to local and national cultures. Bringing up examples of Latin American cases, I argue that television is simultaneously both global and national, shaped by the globalization of media economics and the pull of local and national cultures.

### Privatization and Demand for Format Programming

The massive changes in the structure of television systems in the 1980s and 1990s have connected television systems that, until then, functioned in relative isolation. When television was conceived as a national, protected industry, the global trade of programming ran into regulatory stonewalls. In the past decades, privatization, liberalization, and deregulation of the airwaves removed such limitations and opened television systems to flows of capital and programming. The result has been the increasing homogenization of systems on the principles of private ownership and profit goals.

Together with structural changes, technological developments increased the demand for programming. Before the last wave of globalization, most television industries had a limited number of hours that they needed to fill.

The emergence of a multichannel, liberalized environment raised the possibility that large producers would benefit from increased demand generated by the explosion in the number of television hours. With extensive libraries, well-established distribution networks, and an unparalleled marketing machine, Hollywood companies were poised to profit enormously from those changes. The globalization of television industries seemed unequivocally designed to benefit Hollywood. The fact that most systems shifted toward an "American" model of television gave a substantial advantage to the industry that had invented it.

However, as the principles of commercial television became standardized and industries matured, other domestic industries could also produce and export programming, particularly if they catered to audience niches. What was good for Hollywood could, under the appropriate conditions, also be good for other production companies based in other countries as long as they could master the game of commercial television. Consequently, dozens of television companies based in Western Europe, Australia, and New Zealand gained more than a foothold in the global television market. This is put in evidence by the trade of program formats. Many Western European companies are the copyright holders of recent hit formats. The trade press has dubbed Europe "the leader of reality programming" (Fry 2000). The success of Britain's *Celador* and Pearson, Holland's *Endemol*, or Sweden's *Strix* television is evidence that the pool of producers is no longer limited to traditional Hollywood companies. Pearson Television boasts to be "Britain's only truly global television producer, with over 160 programs currently in production in almost 35 countries around the world." Its hit *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire* has been sold to 79 countries (Schneider 2000). The BBC has sold *The Weakest Link* to 38 countries. Telefónica-owned *Endemol* has blanketed the world with *Big Brother* and other reality programming. *Strix* created the widely popular *Expedition: Robinson* (known as *Survivor* around the world) and *The Bar*. Moreover, the success of these companies has been mentioned lately as evidence of important changes in the European media and tougher competition for Hollywood (Andrews 2000; Carter 2000). They have accomplished what seemed reserved only to a handful of British productions until not so long ago—that is, to sell formats in the almost impenetrable U.S. television market (see O'Regan 2000). These developments have led some observers to talk of a "two-way transatlantic" flow (Guider 2000), while others, stretching the point, conclude that "U.S. influence is slipping" (Jensen 2000) and that "TV imperialism goes into reverse" (Moyes 2000).

Although it is true that some European production companies are able to capitalize on the changes that globalization promoted in the last decades, such statement rush to conclusion, failing to recognize the enormous inequalities that still exist in the global trade of audiovisual products. To

speak of Hollywood's influence as "slipping" or facing "competition" based on the strength of a handful of non-U.S. companies is absurd considering that Hollywood has expanded its worldwide presence through the promotion of globalization policies. No question, in addition to European firms, a number of non-Western companies also became important producers and exporters of television programming. The number of booths at international trade fairs, such as National Association Of Television Program Executives (NATPE) and *Marche International des Films et des Programmes pour la TV, la Video le Cable et les Satellites* (MIPCOM), grew steadily, featuring new sellers of diverse television programs. Japanese firms, whose traditional exports consisted mainly of cartoons and documentaries, now sell dramas and game-show formats. Hong Kong, Egyptian, and Indian producers consolidated their presence in their respective linguistic regions as well as in diasporic markets (Sinclair, Jacka, and Cunningham 1996). Mexican and Brazilian media powerhouses found new opportunities in global television, mostly through the sale of telenovelas (Sinclair 1999; Straubhaar 1991). In recent years, some Latin American producers have also exported formats to the United States and many European countries.

However, the rise and consolidation of television exports from several regions can hardly be considered evidence that Hollywood's dominant position in global television is challenged or, more generally, that inequality in the flows of television and information has been eliminated (Biltereyst and Meers 2000; Golding 1998). Notwithstanding the success of some third world producers, Western domination of the global television market remains undisputed in terms of program sales (and, more broadly, the structure of the industry). Although the pool of global exporters has expanded beyond traditional Hollywood studios as industries matured, companies based in big and wealthy countries have better chances to become global exporters. The largest ten exhibitors at recent MIPCOM meetings were companies based in the United States, Western Europe, or Japan. In the late 1980s, the "U.S. accounted for 71 percent of the total world traffic in television material." As television industries matured and domestic programming topped ratings, it was estimated that the percentage of U.S. shows dropped to 60 percent in 1995 (Segrave 1998). Local preference for domestic or regional shows does not necessarily mean that Hollywood's fortunes have decreased. Recent calculations are that the six major Hollywood studios raked in \$4.5 billion to \$5 billion in 2001, more than the rest of the world combined (Pursell 2001). Although it has become more diversified in terms of the number of producers and more complex in terms of patterns of programming flows, the field of television exports hardly seems leveled.

## Explaining the Popularity of Television Formats

The popularity of formats has been the result of many developments. First, it has been the unintended byproduct of the existence of protectionist laws in some television systems. In some countries, such as Indonesia, the use of subtitles is banned, and programs are broadcast in English or local languages. Such protectionist restrictions prompted broadcasters to purchase foreign scripts (instead of canned shows) and produce them domestically without subtitles. Also, quota policies favor formats over canned shows. Informed by concerns about national culture and the promotion of "national" television, many European countries, for example, have quotas that primarily aim to curb the import of Hollywood programs (Grantham 2000; Tunstall and Machin 1999). Programming quotas have loopholes that allow foreign ideas (rather than foreign shows) to enter as long as they are produced domestically. Format programming, then, is part of business strategies to bypass local programming quotas. If stations broadcast domestic versions of foreign shows, those versions help to satisfy quota requirements; if they buy canned foreign shows, they do not. So peddling formats allows Hollywood studios and Latin American producers, for example, to enter protected markets in Europe by selling scripts, packaged formats, or partnering with domestic companies in coproduction arrangements.

Besides protectionist laws, television formats have recently caught on like wildfire partially because of the huge success of "reality shows" such as *Survivor* and *Big Brother*, particularly in the United States. Like other cultural industries, the television industry is ruled by the "nobody knows" principle (Craves 2000; Gitlin 1983), with constant ebbs and flows in programming trends. Because there is no certainty about the prospects of specific programs and genres, hit shows inevitably engender trends that are followed until exhaustion. Coping, imitation, and jumping on the bandwagon of whatever seems to work at the moment have been typical in the television industry since its origins and, arguably, have become even more common lately as conglomerization has increased pressures for higher profits in shorter periods of time.

Before the latest phase of globalization, trends tended to be limited to national boundaries. Back in the days when television systems were organized around different principles, station executives could not easily adopt successful trends from U.S or European commercial television. What worked in private television could not necessarily be applied in public broadcasting systems or in government-controlled television and vice versa. Structural regulations and institutional expectations limited programming choices. For programming trends to become truly globalized, television systems needed to be patterned along the same principles. Once

such limitations were eliminated and commercial principles became dominant, then, what works in one television system could be adopted elsewhere. In standardizing the structure of television, globalization encouraged the tendency toward imitation and reluctance to promote innovation that underlies commercial broadcasting.

Globalization also accelerated the integration of television systems through business and professional networks. The global presence of media corporations has laid the ground for standardization of television output. International corporate networks are conduits for information about what works and what doesn't. Corporate executives may not be completely familiar with programming trends and audience preferences in every country, but they carry around the world their own experiences that in most cases have been nurtured in television industries in the West and are likely to be updated about current trends in the United States. Although they may be sensitive to local tastes and may give autonomy to domestic personnel familiar with local audiences, their commercial and aesthetic judgments are likely to be informed by trends and production values that are common in the West. Such experiences inform decisions to green-light programming ideas. So domestic programming chiefs are more likely to get approval if they acquire a format that is known to their bosses in Miami, London, or Los Angeles or if they pick a show with aesthetic and production values that are familiar to corporate executives. The growing homogenization of the professional sensibilities among television executives worldwide, embedded in Hollywood's worldview, is an important aspect of "the new international division of cultural labor" (Miller et al. 2001) that needs to be studied. Globalization has nurtured the formation of a cosmopolitan class of industry professionals who, from New York to New Delhi, increasingly share similar concepts and attitudes about "what works" and "what doesn't" in commercial television. Moreover, the globalization of the television business has introduced and improved the formation of informal networks for the dissemination of information about the industry. Television executives are more likely to be familiar with programming hits and duds, trends and preferences, particularly in the United States. Hollywood, arguably, may not be the undisputed seller of television programming worldwide as it was in the early decades of television. U.S. television, however, remains the fishbowl of the global television industry. Executives from around the world immediately take note of whatever seems to work (or fail) in U.S. television.

Attendance at annual trade meetings, exposure to the same trade publications, and regular electronic communications have helped maintain frequent interpersonal contacts that facilitate familiarity with global trends. The number of participants in trade fairs and conferences substantially grew in the last decade. These meetings are places for cultivating a similar

business mindset among industry executives. MIPCOM's motto frankly states it: "MIPCOM speaks the unifying dialogue of the industry: Business." Also, the number of trade publications with international distribution and readership grew. Some weeklies and monthlies regularly feature special sections devoted to international television and to the state of the industry in regions and countries from around the world. Finally, the availability of communication technologies such as cable, satellite, and the internet provide easy access to a wealth of information about programs worldwide. With these interpersonal and technological networks in place, it has become easier, and also professionally imperative, for television executives to know about global trends.

In this sense, the popularity of television formats reflects the globalization of television trends; the adoption of programming that circumstantially offers some predictability in terms of its potential commercial success. In times when such dynamics are almost universal, then, formats satisfy the double demand of finding low-cost programming with a track record. Private television, no matter where it is situated, constantly demands new and cheap programming that can deliver audiences to be sold to advertisers. Buying formats, then, is a cost-saving strategy that eliminates some of the highest fixed costs that fiction programming demands. Some of the most popular formats such as game shows and "reality" shows usually require smaller investments than fiction as they don't need to hire actors and well-known writers. The average cost of ABC's *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire* is \$750,000 compared to \$1.2 million for ABC's *The Practice*; NBC's *Twenty-one* costs not more than \$700,000 versus \$1.4 million for an episode of *Law and Order*; and an installment of *Survivor* costs \$200,000, three times less than \$600,000 for each episode of *King of Queens* (Weinraub 2000). In Britain, it was estimated that an hour of a high-rating quiz show costs £200,000 compared to £1 million for a drama (Hughes 2001). Not surprisingly, then, from Argentina to the United States, labor unions representing actors, writers, and technical staff have resisted the rush to format television on the grounds that it threatens their jobs.

Besides lower costs, imported formats offer some measure of predictability based on their past performances in numerous countries. The constant and increasing pressures for turning profits means that there is little, if any, time for innovating or trying new ideas. All incentives are to reach out for proven ideas that can help diminish uncertainty. Formats, then, are the ultimate risk-minimizing programming strategy. Format owners provide extensive experience that includes the record of shows in different countries, what worked and what didn't, and details on national variations. Game-show producers, for example, bring a plethora of statistics about the records of different games and detailed information about production that draws from hundreds of hours of programming in several continents.



Some format shows (particularly "reality" shows) are also attractive to television companies because they give the opportunity to draw large audiences to their websites that feature interactive games, polls, and details about the contestants. Format copyright owners have been pitching their wares worldwide, stressing that their productions are able to integrate television and the internet, thereby increasing revenues and much-needed net traffic. Also, companies can make additional revenues through the publishing of fanzines and magazines about the shows and newfound celebrities.

### Formats and the Globalization of Intellectual Property Rights

Whereas successful programs and trends, especially in the United States and a few other Western countries, used to be blatantly imitated, the illegal copying of programs has become problematic. Using someone else's ideas in the production of television shows is certainly not new. Since the beginning of the industry, television executives have freely appropriated program ideas without acknowledging their origin or paying royalties. In an industry that has long been characterized by sameness and repetition, borrowing ideas across geographical borders has been common. This practice has not disappeared. Producers continue to find inspiration in other shows. More interconnectivity among television industries and easy access to what is playing around the world means that executives have better and faster information about an expanding pool of potential ideas. Moreover, controversies over the legal rights of program ideas and shows continue. Because intellectual property laws across countries do not grant similar rights, television companies have intensified lobbying efforts to pass legislation that protects their programs. Although violations are more closely monitored than in the past, companies have battled in each other in court over "original" authorship of highly profitable program formats. In the past years, there have been various copyright lawsuits and accusations. U.K.-based companies Planet 24 and Castaway Television Productions have unsuccessfully sued Endemol for "theft of format," arguing that the latter's *Big Brother* resembled *Survivor*. CBS initiated legal actions against Fox claiming that *Boot Camp* stole ideas from *Survivor*. Celador sued Denmark Radio for copyright infringement of *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*.

These legal battles illustrate the rising importance of intellectual property issues in the agenda of global cultural producers and Western governments. The reasons for why these debates have become prominent recently are many (e.g., the coming of digital technologies, the separation of form and content) and are common to all cultural industries. Issues specific to the television industry need to be mentioned, however. Globalization has

facilitated the “stealing” of programs by fostering increasing interconnection among industries. The expansion of cable and satellite signals and the gradual articulation of integrated global business networks provide a constant source of programming ideas that can be appropriated. Simultaneously, globalization has improved the chances for companies to monitor and litigate copyright violations. Like large content producers in other industries, television companies have become increasingly interested in detecting and persecuting violators. Having extensive operations in the most important television markets, large producers have better chances to find transgressors. As a result of these concerns, format producers gathered at the 2000 Cannes Marche International des Programmes de Television (MIPTV) launched the Format Recognition and Protection Association (FRAPA). Members of the Monaco-based organization include major television companies interested in investigating and preventing piracy. FRAPA created an International Television Paper Format Registry.

In terms of intellectual property rights, the effects of globalization on television companies have been similar to the ones on the “copyright industries” at large. For all content producers, globalization has posed a challenge—namely, how to harmonize copyright laws and improve enforcement at a global level, particularly in markets where piracy is rampant and governments are “uncooperative” in meeting corporate objectives.

In summary, the popularity of formats is largely the result of fundamental institutional changes in the global television industry—namely, the domination of the private model of television, the standardization of commercial practices, and rising concerns about copyright infringements.

### Television Formats and National Cultures

It would be limiting to try to understand the popularity of formats by only addressing changes in the structure of television systems. It also reflects where economics and culture meet in global markets. International flows of standardized, delocalized formats prove that audiences cling to local and national consciousness. This may seem ironic only if we assume that globalization inevitably eliminates cultural diversity and breeds homogenization. The dichotomy between globalization as the agent of cookie-cutter commercial cultures or the force for cultural hybridity and resistance is false, however. Global media and the national are not antithetical but, actually, are integrated in complex ways.

The popularity of television formats is at the crossroads of global and local dynamics of the cultural economy of television. Contemporary television is a Janus-faced industry that in the name of profitability needs to commodify real and imagined nations while being open to global flows of

ideas and money. The global circulation of formats responds to programming strategies to bridge transnational economic interests and national sentiments of belonging. Such strategies neither follow patriotic concerns nor suggest that television dutifully respects the diversity of national cultures. Rather, they result from the intention to maximize profits while “the national” continues to articulate cultural identities. In turn, television programming recreates and perpetuates national sentiments. Formats reflect the globalization of the economics of the television industry and the persistence of national cultures in a networked world. They make it possible to adapt successful programs to national cultures. In comparison to canned shows, they provide television executives with a reliable and malleable solution to produce potential hit shows. Most foreign shows often run into cultural barriers and, thus, are less likely to become ratings boosters. They can be cheaper than domestic productions and a low-cost strategy to fill more television hours, but they are unlikely audience magnets.

Compared to canned programming, the question of culture is thematized differently in formats. Formats carry meanings that are not necessarily attached to national cultures. Formats are culturally specific but nationally neutral. The DNA of formats is rooted in cultural values that transcend the national. Textual readings of popular formats such as game shows suggest that they champion the culture of consumption (Fiske 1990; Otnes 1996). “Reality shows” like *Survivor* can be read as the global projection of capitalism, naked individualism, and competition. However, format shows are less prone to have specific references to the local and national, precisely because they are designed to “travel well” across national boundaries. Formats purposefully eviscerate the national. Could we say that *Survivor/Expedition: Robinson* is unequivocally a Dutch show? What makes *The Bar* Swedish and *Taxi Orange* Austrian? How does *Waku Waku* represent Japanese national identity? What is British about *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*? Because formats explicitly empty out signs of the national, they can become nationalized—that is, customized to domestic cultures. For commercial television, this is the advantage of television formats over ready-made shows. Because formats are conceived as flexible formula, traces of national belonging are downplayed and even eradicated. The result is a pasteurized, transnational product detached from national cultures. Formats, then, reveal the dynamics of “glocalization” (Robertson 1992) in the pursuit of profit: the adaptation of programming formula to the tastes of domestic audiences.

Hollywood-filled television schedules around the world might suggest that domestic audiences prefer U.S. programs or that the latter enjoy the “competitive advantage of narrative transparency” (Olson 1999). Neither audience preference nor the presumed textual universality of programs account for the wide presence of Hollywood fare, however. Such

arguments downplay or simply ignore the structure of the global cultural economy and the institutional workings of the television industry that make certain choices available. Audiences' choices follow industrial dynamics and decisions. To suggest that schedules accurately reflect audience tastes falls into "consumer sovereignty" arguments that ignore the variety of forces and decisions that shape programming schedules. When television is organized on the basis of commercial principles, explanations for why schedules feature foreign or national programming depend on profit calculations and the business savvy of producers in selling their wares in different markets.

More than audience tastes, trade practices and costs better explain the content of schedules. Programming decisions are often contingent on whether owners believe that substantial investments are required to turn a profit. Those calculations depend on the fact that not all television industries offer similar conditions for national production. When the economic conditions are propitious (e.g., substantial economy of scale, advertising investments, sizable domestic market), companies are more likely to produce programming even though the costs are higher than buying foreign shows. Even under these conditions, television companies might opt to produce cheap (talk shows, news, variety shows, game shows) over expensive genres (fiction, documentaries), particularly in countries with small economies of scale and infant television industries. However, even when domestic conditions could allow some production, filling schedules with foreign canned programming is preferred because it's significantly cheaper.

In the last decade, ratings have confirmed that when given a choice, audiences prefer domestic and regional content to foreign programs (Hoskins, McFayden, and Finn 1997; Langdale 1997; Waisbord 2000a; Waterman and Rogers 1994). This is hardly an indication of the leveling of opportunities for television industries to produce content that, at least in principle, reflects better local realities. Audiences might prefer local content, but domestic industries might not produce it. Only under specific economic and industrial circumstances is local programming able to knock Hollywood shows off prime-time schedules, and Hollywood productions are used as fillers in off-peak hours when audiences and advertising revenues are smaller. Not all television industries have the capacity to produce a significant number of hours to satisfy demand, however.

Against the backdrop of different possibilities for domestic production, audiences' localism is an important factor, particularly when markets are sizable and wealthy. This is the reason why many cable and satellite networks decided to split their signals along cultural lines by offering regional services. MTV, ESPN, and other cable networks have realized that programming in local languages that taps into local talent and preferences is

more profitable than monolingual, "American"-only broadcasts (Hils 1998; Koranteng 1999). These services increasingly feature a higher percentage of locally and regionally produced content. It is not easy to pin down exactly what it is that audiences prefer about domestic content. The industry comes up with mostly ad hoc, post facto explanations about why certain programs were hits. Explanations do not necessarily guarantee that programs with similar characteristics would perform similarly. It is generally believed that audiences choose programming that resonates with their own cultures. To examine this issue, I analyze the relation among formats, narratives, and language by looking at the experience of Latin American television.

### Formats and Narratives

The conventional wisdom in the industry seems to be that audiences like to recognize familiar themes, places, and characters on television. Humor and drama are favorites because they are commonly rooted in local and national cultures. Likewise, the appeal of news and mediated sports lies in the fact that they continue to cultivate linkages to the local and the national. Newscasts anchor a sense of community by relaying information about current events. Televised sports provide opportunities for representing and reenacting local and national sentiments. It continues to operate as an arena in which national identities retain important commercial and ideological functions (Whannel 1993).

Although universal stories and foreign places may be appealing, television audiences consistently prefer narratives that incorporate familiar elements. This is why audiences prefer productions coming from countries that share "cultural proximity" (Straubhaar 1991). However, audiences may find remote even coproductions among companies based in countries that share cultural elements such as language. A case in point is the commercial failure of Latin American telenovelas that featured multinational casts and stories that evolved in many countries in the region. According to television executives I interviewed, these programs flopped because they were a hodgepodge, a "Latino-pudding" that unsuccessfully tried to articulate a common regional identity. The result was that they featured a collection of scattered references to national cultures that ultimately lacked cultural specificity. Even the presence of popular, national stars did not help to deliver bigger ratings in their own countries.

Audience preferences for domestic content presents television executives with a dilemma: content that is strongly embedded in local and national cultures has a better chance to be successful domestically, but it is less likely to find interested buyers and enthusiastic audiences abroad. Because foreign sales are, for most Latin American companies, secondary

business strategies, the success of telenovelas hinges mainly on the domestic market. Moreover, because metropolitan markets capture the lion's share of audience ratings and advertising revenues, it is not unusual that telenovelas unmistakably reflect the local culture of big cities (where production companies usually are based). In Argentina, for example, the greater Buenos Aires area has 78 percent of media advertising and 60 percent of television homes. No wonder, then, that audiences in the interior find that most productions are too "*porteñas*" (as Buenos Aires culture/people are called).

Because domestic and, particularly, metropolitan markets continue to be central to television economics, producers are inclined to incorporate local stories, humor, and characters in their programs, even though it potentially deters marketability abroad. This is why productions that in the industry lingo are "too local," such as "period" telenovelas or those heavily immersed in local politics, have a harder time finding international markets than programs that are detached from the local. In Latin America, there is a long tradition of telenovelas that place classic love stories and family conflicts amid historical and political struggles. It has been argued that many have been profitable domestically precisely because they offer audiences opportunities to recognize themselves as members of a cultural community (Allen 1995; Martin-Barbero 1993). Their exportability is limited, however. If they are sold, it is usually because of their low costs. The relative higher costs of Hollywood productions in small and impoverished television markets in Eastern Europe and Asia benefited Latin American productions in the 1980s and 1990s.

In contrast to "national" productions, telenovelas that tell universal love stories (e.g., rags-to-riches, Cinderella-themed plots), without specific local references and featuring known stars have fewer problems in crossing cultural boundaries. The best example has been Mexico's Televisa-produced telenovelas. Their remarkable success in countries as diverse as Russia and the Philippines has been explained by the fact that besides the charisma of lead stars, national references are almost absent from the stories. Particularly compared with Brazilian "period" and contemporary telenovelas (Trinta 1998) or TV Azteca's telenovelas that address political "headlines" issues, Televisa's productions typically feature universal stories.

Unlike canned shows that are steeped in specific national cultures, formats are open texts that can be adapted. Within the constraints dictated by their owners, domestic productions can fit local narratives, histories, humor, events, and characters into the basic formulas that they purchase. Because formats are essentially open, they cannot be seen simply as transmission belts for Western values. In his thoughtful study of formats, Albert Moran (1998) argues that formats are places for negotiation between domestic and foreign cultures rather than Trojan horses of Western culture.

Formats neither crystallize a static notion of national culture nor are pure impositions of external values. They are texts in which different understandings of national identity are projected and redefined against the backdrop of imported formulas. To conclude that national cultures are the casualties of television formats, Moran suggests, is to ignore the flexibility of formats and the active role of audiences in consuming television (also see Skovmand 1992).

Format television shows, then, organize experiences of the national. Even "reality" shows, which unlike "period" or "contemporary" fiction are not ostensibly designed to articulate national narratives, provide spaces for the representation of national cultures. Particularly in times when private television has little incentives to produce fiction and prefers to churn out low-cost shows, one should not ignore the fact that game shows, variety shows, or "reality" shows also offer opportunities for audiences to recognize themselves as members of national communities. The question of how the national is expressed and recreated in those genres, however, has not received sufficient attention. Studies have generally prioritized the textual analysis of "highbrow" programs (dramas, documentaries) that purposefully delineate cultural boundaries through historical narratives and appealing to collective memories. Aside from the textual characteristics of specific genres, television is intertwined with the national in multifaceted ways. More than in specific moments when programming appeals to nationalistic discourses, television has the power of naturalizing cultural connections in everyday viewing.

### Language and Formats of Television Fiction

One way in which television turns "the national" into a pre-given, constitutive reality is through broadcast languages. Arguments about globalization qua cultural homogenization pay inadequate attention to the fact that language remains a pillar of cultural distinctiveness and national identities in a globalized world. Notwithstanding the consolidation of English as the world's lingua franca, the linkages between language and nation are still important and, in some cases, fundamental to an understanding of processes of cultural unification and difference. The formation of national identities continues to be inseparable from language (De Swaan 1991; Edwards 1985). Language is the basis for the politics of inclusion and exclusion that are at the center of processes of identity formation (Anderson 1983; Hall and du Gay 1996).

From this perspective, it is important to consider the relation between media and language. Languages delineate cultural boundaries that articulate flows of television programming. This is the main finding of the argument that global patterns of television flows are articulated around "geo-

linguistic markets" (Sinclair, Jacka, and Cunningham 1996). So, even at a time when global television audiences arguably seem to be watching the same or similar shows, television programs in vernacular languages continue to anchor a sense of cultural belonging and function as a privileged site for the reproduction of nations. In a world saturated by Hollywood content, mediated vernaculars are both cultural binders and reminders of belonging to distinctive cultural communities.

The force of broadcast language (or mediated language, in general) lies in its invisibility, on the fact that we rarely notice it. Language constitutes an example of "banal nationalism" (Billig 1995). Billig (1995) argues that the ideological habits that enable nations to be reproduced "are not removed from everyday life. . . . Daily, the nation is indicated, or 'flagged,' in the lives of its citizenry" (p. 6). For him, the image of "the flag hanging unnoticed on the public building" (p. 8) is one of the best illustrations of banal nationalism. Language can be understood along similar lines. The common belief that languages and nations are "naturally" inseparable hides, for Billig, the artificiality of such relation (also see Anderson 1983).

Following Billig's argument, we can understand broadcast language as a way in which nations are daily reproduced. Television normalizes the ties between language and nations. The force of televised language lies in its ordinariness, in continuously weaving a seamless linkage between nation and language. Television "flags" nationhood often through regular programming in specific languages. This is different from "media events" (Dayan and Katz 1992) that purposefully appeal to the nation through communal media experiences. "Media events" such as official funerals, the signing of international treaties, or global sports are moments of collective mobilization in the name of the nation; television is put in the service of nationalism as a political movement. Every day, however, television perpetuates national bonds in the mold of "banal nationalism." It is the active reminder more than the active mobilizer of national consciousness. While the broadcast of momentous occasions that congregate extraordinarily large audiences is sporadic, television regularly keeps nationhood alive by "flagging" spoken languages and drawing and sustaining linguistic boundaries such as "diasporic" media that maintain national identities through perpetuating linguistic bonds among immigrant communities (Sinclair and Cunningham 2000).

Perhaps because of the invisibility of broadcast language, this point has not been sufficiently emphasized. Whereas literary studies have focused on how media narratives and storytelling articulate nations, historical-sociological studies have addressed the role of public broadcasting and media industries in "imagining" nations (Scannell and Cardiff 1991; van der Bulck 2001). It is also necessary to consider that the media propagates and reinforces national sentiments through perpetuating linguistic bonds.



Contemporary television, like newspapers in the nineteenth century (Anderson 1983), contributes to the perpetuation of national cultures by spreading a vernacular and reinforcing linguistic bonds among populations. Thus, programs in vernacular languages that are not explicitly interested in articulating national cultures also provide a place for the representation of the national. In legitimizing some and excluding other languages, television allows for the recognition of language-based cultural communities. The need for dubbing and subtitling imported programs and films implicitly acknowledges that any attempt to produce cultural uniformity clashes with the resilience of vernacular languages.

The global popularity of formats attests to the resilience of language as a constitutive element of national identities. Compared with "reality" programs, fiction is more difficult to be formatted and adapted. Scripted programming, including fiction, tends to be more culturally specific and is more expensive to produce. Despite these difficulties, fictional programming has also been formatted for two main reasons: linguistic barriers and the cultural nature of drama and comedy. Even when countries have a similar linguistic and cultural base such as Britain and the United States, original programs are steeped in different webs of meaning that are lost when they cross borders (Miller 2000). Formats, then, offer a way to adapt not only the content but also the language of original productions.

Latin America offers an interesting case to examine this issue because amid the intensification of regional trade of programming in the last decades (Sinclair 1999), the Spanish/Portuguese divide continues to be one of the most visible fault lines in the region's cultural geography. The division is certainly not as pronounced as in Europe, where media projects intended to create a regional culture have run up against linguistic fragmentation and the strength of vernacular languages (Kilborn 1993). Still, the issue of language divisions remains an important one, particularly in relation to regional trade of television. Serialized fiction, namely telenovelas, continues to be the backbone of television programming in Latin America. Although schedules feature a heavy diet of "reality" programming, television executives view telenovelas as the fundamental pillars of daily schedules. Language has been a sticking point in the regional trade of telenovelas. Since the 1970s, many Spanish-dubbed Brazilian telenovelas have been shown in Spanish-speaking Latin America (as well as in Spain), and some continue to be very popular. But as television industries matured and state-owned television stations were privatized (Waisbord 2000b), more Spanish-language productions from different countries became available in the international market. This made programming executives from Spanish-speaking countries less enthusiastic about importing Brazilian telenovelas. Although the latter generally have superior production values, gripping stories, and often feature

brehtaking outdoor scenery that is appealing to audiences, they hit a cultural wall. One obstacle is arguably the fact that some of the most popular Brazilian telenovelas are embedded in national histories, politics, and myths that do not resonate with global audiences. Simultaneously, however, these characteristics work in favor of Brazilian productions, branding them as “the exotic other” in international markets. In many Latin American countries, however, the main obstacle has been linguistic. Even the best dubbing cannot make up for the fact that they are not originally spoken in Spanish. This cultural distance has been more acute in countries with substantial domestic production (such as Mexico), where audiences are accustomed to programming in their own language both domestic productions and dubbed Hollywood shows.

Something similar happens on the other side of the linguistic divide. In Brazil, a country that produces a significant amount of programming, only a small amount of foreign programs is aired on terrestrial television. As one of the largest global media corporations and the country’s long-standing dominant television company, Globo has produced thousands of hours of programming for decades. Its annual production was estimated at 2,239 hours in 2000 (Fernandez 2001). It produces 80 percent of its schedule (Cajueiro 2000). SBT and Bandeirantes also produce a considerable number of hours, particularly variety and talk shows. Hoping to chip away at Globo’s audience share, both networks occasionally decided to import programs from Spanish-speaking countries to keep costs down, particularly when a downturn in the economy slowed down advertising revenues. Because of language differences that Portuguese dubbing cannot completely bridge, they purchased formats of successful telenovelas. SBT has purchased formats of Televisa telenovelas that are produced in Brazil with local actors. Bandeirantes acquired from Argentina’s Telefe the hit children-oriented novela *Chiquititas*. Under Telefe’s supervision, the Portuguese version with Brazilian actors was filmed in Buenos Aires. Globo, which did not buy programs from Spanish-speaking Latin American countries for decades, bought the script of the Colombian hit “Betty la Fea” for \$100,000, a paltry sum considering that the cost of an hour of its lavish telenovelas is several times higher. Whereas Globo justified the purchase by stating that it would produce a version adapted to Brazilian culture and television, observers speculated that Globo’s decision was motivated by a different interest—namely, to prevent SBT and Bandeirantes, who traditionally rely on successful telenovelas from Spanish-speaking countries, from acquiring the Brazilian rights of a potential hit.

But linguistic screens are not limited to the presence of different languages; the multiplicity of Spanish accents is another cultural barrier in the trade of television shows in the region. One could argue that accents, not simply Spanish, became visible markers of national identity in Spanish-

speaking Latin America. As Nancy Morris (1999, 55) writes, "accent . . . is perhaps one of the strongest ways of establishing a local identity."

The old quip is that Latin America is a region divided by the same language. In a region where the Spanish empire imposed cultural homogeneity through language over a variety of indigenous languages, language did not become the distinctive marker of national identity in the postindependence period, as it did in other postcolonial societies (see Mar-Molinero 2000). Because most states (excluding Brazil and the English-, Dutch- and French-speaking Caribbean islands) shared the same language, they could not be defined as nations in terms of language. Only in a few countries did indigenous languages (e.g., Guarani in Paraguay) gain official acceptance as part of the national imaginary, but they had limited, if any, presence in the national media. With little sensitivity to linguistic diversity within Latin American nation-states, radio, film, and television have greatly contributed to making specific accents distinctive signifiers of the nation. Not only did they nationalize Spanish, particularly among illiterate populations scattered through vast and hard-to-reach territories, but they also nationalized the accents of the capital cities, where the largest media industries historically have been based (Martin-Barbero 1993).

At the regional level, television was responsible for the expansion of Mexican accents. This was the consequence of two developments. First, for decades, Latin American audiences have watched Hollywood film and television productions dubbed mainly into Mexican-accented Spanish. Second, Televisa has exported telenovelas and children's shows throughout the region, some of which were massively popular, since the early 1970s. The result was that Mexican accents became the lingua franca of Latin American television and are widely believed to be more "neutral" than any other accent. This gave Televisa a huge competitive advantage over television producers from other countries. Televisa's success was based on the fact that audiences were familiar with Mexican accents, a familiarity that its productions reinforced. This advantage was not limited to South America, but it also extended to the United States given Televisa's long-standing presence as the leading program provider in the Spanish-language television market. Besides culture, Televisa certainly enjoyed other economic advantages; it expanded regionally earlier than other television industries and produced a substantial number of television hours.

Because Spanish-speaking audiences are generally used to Mexican accents, productions in any other accents sound "foreign." This fact certainly has not escaped Brazilian producers, who prefer Mexican dubbing of their productions for Latin American distribution. It has also been a main difficulty for other Latin American producers to enter regional markets. Besides business obstacles, they have also faced accents as a cultural wall. For Argentine programs, for example, accents are a major cultural hurdle to

export their productions north of Ecuador. The situation is different in the Southern Cone as well as in Bolivia and Peru where audiences are more familiar with Argentine accents, particularly after the satellite signal of Telefe and other Buenos Aires-based regional cable networks started operations in the 1990s. But elsewhere, audiences reject the Argentine accent, particularly in countries where, given the absence of indigenous fiction and the reluctance of media moguls to support production (such as in Central America), audiences have watched Mexican programming for decades.

Having been exposed mostly to national accents, Mexican audiences find other accents foreign. Equipped with an enormous production capacity and vast libraries, Televisa has accustomed domestic audiences to Mexican accents. Its limited foreign programming is overwhelmingly Hollywood productions, particularly films (Sanchez-Ruiz 2000). Aiming to reduce Televisa's audience share, newcomer TV Azteca resorted to in-house and independent productions and, in some opportunities, to regional shows. But recognizing the difficulty of jumping over the accent barrier, it opted to produce versions of popular shows from the region, such as the Argentine hit *Chiquititas*.

Accent barriers are also evident in the trade of programming between Spain and Latin America. Television audiences are not used to each other's accents. Only a small amount of Spanish productions has been aired on Latin American television. Spanish audiences have been accustomed to national accents in both domestic and foreign programming. If interested in shows from across the Atlantic, Spanish networks are more likely to buy the libretto and formats instead of canned shows. In recent years, for example, they bought formats of Argentine programming (variety shows, novelas, game shows, and dramas) and produced domestic versions that incorporated news headlines, local references, and characters.

### To Globalize, McDonaldize

The traffic of television formats in Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking countries suggests that formats allow companies to jump over linguistic barriers. This is what Hollywood companies recently learned: because of domestic preference for "national languages" (and national programming), they cannot rely solely on the old practice of dumping programs to conquer international markets. The time when television systems went on a buying binge and loaded up on Hollywood productions to fill increasing demand for terrestrial television has changed, particularly in large and wealthy markets. In a world of linguistic diversity and more developed television industries, Hollywood television studios had to find new and creative ways to do business. Coproducing local-language programs with domestic companies and other forms of partnership illustrate the "think

globally, program locally" mantra that currently dominates the global television industry. Format television shows "glocalization" at work—that is, the merits of a business "multicultural" strategy that is "sensitive" to cultural diversity. Such sensitivity is not informed by respect for or interest in preserving "multiculturalism" but rather to maximize opportunities for commercial gain. For global television companies, cultural difference is not an obstacle, but, if incorporated properly, it could be a boon. Programming hybridity makes sense because it makes money. In the international division of cultural labor, domestic companies are more attuned to local sensibilities than global corporations and, consequently, are better at manufacturing programs that incorporate the local and the national. In the traffic of global television brands, the partnership of global and domestic companies aims to address cultural diversity as a component of global markets. Cultural difference is a business matter rather than a political project.

Grappling with the reality of globalized economics and localized cultures, the global television industry has found formats as convenient instruments to leap over cultural boundaries while taking economic advantage of the substantial transformations that domestic television industries experienced in the past decades. Formats are a form of McTelevision. Shorthand for the McDonald's fast-food chain, the prefix *Mc* stands for a business model characterized by efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control that caters products to specific local requirements, usually informed by cultural factors (Ritzer 1998). Applied to the television industry, formats represent the global commercialization of an efficient and predictable program that can be tweaked according to local tastes. McTelevision is the selling of programming ideas with a track record that are sufficiently flexible to accommodate local cultures to maximize profitability. The national origin of the format is less important than its effectiveness. Formats are de-territorialized (see Tomlinson 1999); they have no national home; they represent the disconnection between culture, geography, and social spaces that characterizes globalization. Signs of cultural territories are removed so domestic producers can incorporate local color and global audiences can paradoxically feel at home when watching them. Locality needs to be evicted so it can be reintroduced as long as it does not alter the basic concept. Although any television company can come up with such formula and market it globally, Hollywood and some European television companies maintain substantial advantage in the selling of formats. The popularity of formats suggests that global television industry is becoming a giant cultural vacuum cleaner that constantly sucks in ideas from around the world and turns them into commodities. In a global world, capital flows encounter fewer obstacles in crossing borders than in the past, but canned programming continues to run into cultural and linguistic

barriers. Economic and cultural boundaries do not seem to be eroding similarly.

### Where the Global Meets the Local

The evolution of the global television industry has largely shaped arguments about the circulation of television programming. Since the 1960s, analyses have reflected not only political and theoretical debates but also the state of international television flows. Theories of media imperialism and "one-way street" flows expressed the first phase in the 1960s and 1970s, which can be characterized by the domination of Hollywood productions and infant industries worldwide. In the 1980s and 1990s, arguments about multiple flows responded to a new phase that featured the rise and consolidation of new producers and exporters, particularly in the third world. At the cusp of a new century, a new phase seems to be emerging, one characterized by the increasing complexity of flows of capital and programming and novel developments in the economics, production, and export of television.

One of the new developments is the appeal of television formats both for exporters and buyers. The contemporary trade of formats puts in evidence that the globalization of media economics and culture are intertwined but are not identical. Globalization has been responsible for major transformations in the structure of television systems. Privatization and deregulation have opened the doors to cross-border flows of capital and technology. Those changes opened new ways for media business to expand into international markets through output deals, joint ventures, programming sales, and production arrangements. Globalization has unsettled past linkages between state and capital, geography and business, the local and the global. No longer do conflicts neatly fit in the "national versus foreign" mold. Multiple alliances and conflicts have emerged. Governments and domestic companies tried to fend off foreign powerhouses through requirements of national citizenship for media owners and limitations on the percentage of foreign ownership of domestic business (Morris and Waisbord 2001). Such attempts to harness the global traffic of capital are bypassed by international and domestic corporations, who, having realized that they mutually need each other, decide to partner in different ways.

Amid these dynamics, the industry became more integrated as a whole. The structure of television systems became streamlined along the lines of the private model. Business is the name of the game, regardless of where company headquarters are located. As some domestic industries matured, a new slew of producers began peddling programs worldwide. Consequently, flows of capital and television programming are more complex than in the past. The globalization of television economics has not made national cultures irrelevant. Even when screens have been inundated with

Hollywood fare, television remains a central place for articulating the national. Media narratives and spoken language continue to organize a sense of cultural belonging.

Formats are not the catalysts for cultural sameness or the loss of cultural diversity; adaptations provide opportunities for reimagining nations in various ways (Moran 1998). Global audiences are watching the same formats, but they engage culturally in ways that are not predetermined. Formats are ultimately contained in local and national meanings. It would be a mistake, however, to celebrate formats as harbingers of cultural diversity. Just because formats are "glocalized," they do not necessarily usher in multiculturalism or stimulate cultural democracy. First, formats are not entirely malleable. Copyright holders ultimately determine what changes can be incorporated; they remain "the author" of the text despite a variety of national adaptations and audiences' interpretations. Second, adaptations run a whole gamut of possibilities, partially related to the fact that some genres (drama) are more open-ended than others (game shows) (Moran 1998). We can't simply assume that because formats are adapted, they express national cultures in similar ways. How is the national expressed in formats? Unlike versions in Northern Europe, the Spanish producers of *Big Brother* decided to include outdoor swimming pools because of better weather. The Russian producers of *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire* eliminated the "ask the audience" lifeline because people intentionally give the wrong answer to contestants. The Argentine edition of *The Price is Right* had to make room for winners to celebrate effusively with the friendly host and to include more games with low-price prizes (people there prefer more opportunities to win cheaper items than fewer chances to win big-ticket consumer goods). The Brazilian version of a Mexican telenovela brings home settings and references familiar to domestic audiences. These adaptations evoke and materialize different meanings of local/national cultures. Can we say that format adaptations equally reflect national culture or nurture a sense of local/national community? What kind of opportunities do different television genres and format adaptations offer for organizing a sense of cultural belonging?

These questions need to be examined by expanding our thinking about the consequences of globalization in the television industry. The issue of the "effects" of international television flows needs to be asked not only in terms of "effect/audience activity" but also in terms of "missing opportunities" for cultural diversity to be expressed. The contemporary popularity of "reality show" formats as a cheap programming alternative arguably elbows out genres such as drama and comedy that, when compared with "reality" programming and game shows, offer different possibilities for the expression of national experiences. When profit is the bottom line and "reality" formats are available at a fraction of the cost of fictional program-

ming, commercial television does not have to bother to produce fiction, to paraphrase Manuel Alvarado (2000). Format television does not eradicate national cultures, but as a reflection of a global industry solely concerned with quick commercial success and no patience for innovation, it decreases opportunities for diverse and complex representations of "the ties that still bind" (Waisbord 1998) local and national communities.

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