

Roundtable: Toys, T-Shirts, and Tumblers: These Are Not the Paratexts You Are Looking For (Hint: The Films Are)

The Rom-Com to Toy Line Journey of *Rabbit Without Ears*: Warner Bros. Germany's Local Franchising Efforts

Courtney Brannon Donoghue, Oakland University

As the increased importance of international markets has shifted the spotlight for Hollywood studios over the past decade, Warner Bros. and its competitors have restructured local production and distribution operations across Europe, Latin America, and Asia. In a conversation with WB's Executive Vice President of International, Richard Fox argues "local markets are not a complementary or supplementary strategy . . . [local production] is now a core business." For example, Warner Bros. developed a country manager system in the late-1990s to complement distribution of their tentpole studio titles with strategic participation in local-language projects. A general manager and production manager oversee creative and financial participation in culturally specific films intended for local audiences in Germany, Spain, Brazil, etc. Much of the scholarly and industrial attention on the international market focuses on the growing dependence on franchising and cross-media platforms for the English-language blockbuster worldwide. But studio interest today in world building and multi-windows storytelling extends beyond the latest installment of *Harry Potter* or *The Avengers*. These commercial practices are also transforming how Warner Bros. and other studios approach local markets and audiences. A central question for this discussion: how is a reconsideration of convergence practices outside the Anglophone region transforming studio efforts to localize franchises, implement cross media, and develop merchandising? How do we tease out the relationship between franchising, cross media platforms, and localization efforts of the studios to explore this productive space beyond the major tentpole properties?

Warner Bros. co-produced and distributed the hugely successful 2007 German blockbuster *Keinohrhasen* (*Rabbit Without Ears*) for the local market with director, writer, and star Til Schweiger's company, Barefoot Films. (According to WB Germany's general manager, *Rabbits Without Ears* performed similarly to the last *Harry Potter* installment in its German theatrical release) In a six-year period, the romantic comedy was expanded into a 2009 sequel *Zweiohrküken* (*Chicken With Two Ears*), children's book series, 3D animated film, and various toy lines based on the stuffed animal characters—rabbit without ears and chicken with two ears. The family franchise and its calculated extension across multiple platforms—theatrical, television, home entertainment, and other ancillary markets—were developed in-house at WB Germany along with their independent partners. This case reflects a rich example of the increasingly localized and specialized nature of Warner Bros.'s strategies that complicate scholarly debates on transmedia efforts and merchandising as a global phenomenon. What this reveals is a negotiated interaction between localized and globalized priorities, independent and corporate partnerships, and shifting commercial consumers tastes and technologies.

On the one hand, the *Rabbit Without Ears* franchise relied heavily on the German star system, German Federal Film Fund, and continued strength of the local television and home entertainment markets for circulating German content. This required Warner Bros.'s ability to adapt to local production cultures and build long-term creative partnerships with producers, such as WB's five-picture deal with Schweiger. On the other hand, this franchise illustrates how local divisions of global conglomerates like Warner Bros. are utilizing specific commercial storytelling models and cross media efforts to reconsider how to target specific audiences and create localized branded content. The journey of *Rabbit Without Ears* from romantic comedy to toy line to family 3D animated feature marks a particular moment in studio local operations towards franchising and licensing on a smaller, more targeted scale.

While this particular case of Warner Bros.'s local franchising and merchandising efforts speaks to the specificities of the German media market in this transitional moment, it also illustrates continued assumptions and challenges within these local territories. A tension exists between localization efforts by the territory offices and more universal industry lore around how these films do (or do not) circulate. Namely, every local studio manager I met in Europe and Latin America asserted that comedies do not travel outside of their local market. Richard Fox suggested "90 percent [of LLPs in general] don't travel and it takes two to three years to get full values from the windows." Therefore, in order to build long-term franchises and partnerships, WB's local operations have experimented with developing franchising and merchandising strategies to expand and extend a film's distribution platforms within the local market. Overall, I want to propose a few questions for the larger conversation. How can we complicate understandings of franchising and local studio participation as a top-down strategy? How can we rethink merchandising and cross media strategies as more than merely a global and universal process reflecting studio interest or instead a way to expand the reach and shelf life of local content? Finally, what are the larger cultural, economic, political, and technological implications?