

Decentering Innovation: Television’s Transnational Turn in the Age of the Global Format

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In recent years, global television format trades are radically transforming the established models in television global production, circulation, trade, and consumption (Oren and Shahaf, 2012; Esser, 2014; Moran, 2014). As this trend impacts a growing number of world markets across more television genres, it also leads to the emergence of a more transnationally integrated, dynamic, and diverse global industry. One of the most notable changes has been in the world of content development where, as one TV executive has put it “everything is international now...and everything is possible” (NATPE 2014, “The other format: scripted series going global”).

Furthermore, formats, their trades and nature are constantly evolving. The proliferation of industrial practices and exchange involved puts formats on the cutting edge of the most innovative trends in television. Format deals are no longer relegated to the game/reality/competition programming space where they had first become so highly visible. Although prime-time concepts with the potential to re-amassing national or regional audiences for live-to-air broadcast are still extremely important, their initial popularity marks the HISTORICAL moment in which global format first “exploded” onto the scene. currently however, we are witnessing a new stage of the evolution of the format phenomenon which is characterize by a growing number of international players, a much more intensive and multi-directional flow of capital in forms of investment, cooperation, development deals and co-production, a growing range of exchange practices across more genres, channels, and online/mobile/digital platforms.

It is therefore increasingly important to complicate and question early theorizations and models that tried understanding formats and format-driven TV globalization by generalizing based on one, specific, if highly visible type of programming.

Two interrelated if seemingly very different trends here are the rise of the “scripted” format, and especially sophisticated exchange in “quality” dramatic series on the one hand and, on the other hand the growing importance of “digitally native” formats that seek to “melt together the digital and TV by providing a 3 screen or “360 degree” experience for contemporary tech savvy “users”.

Across all these trends, one of the most crucial – and under-examined development is the rising dominance of previously marginalized players, who are now taking the lead in shaping new television. Markets like Denmark, Turkey, Finland, and Korea, alongside the U.K are emerging as leaders in this space while the U.S. is quite shockingly, lagging behind in terms of the innovation/adaptation binary. As the abovementioned NATPE panel revealed, the big Hollywood studios (CBS and WB each had a representative on the panel) have only very recently jumped on the bandwagon by forming format distribution arms that seek to utilize their back libraries for format re-sales (Ibid). The fact that they are latecomers to the format game demonstrate a kind of role reversal, driven by the fact that, as both executive admitted they will “never ever make as much on format sales as they will on “ready-mades” or finished tapes. So, the

Hollywood dominance is not done away with but rather gets reconfigured here as formats represent a “hunger game” – in which small industries that do not profit from the dominant revenue models of global TV have more incentive to push the envelope and experiment with new ways to produce, distribute and monetize TV.

Formats are thus at the heart of a host of interrelated trends which are transforming global television and , as such, serve a useful focal point for exploring the ways in which the medium – as a global whole - is adapting and changing to fit the new technological and cultural environment. New players are busily designing new TV formats to, meet (and shape) the changing needs of a new generation of viewers/users – who are no longer satisfied by playing a passive consumer role.

To illustrate the complexity of flows involved here – of forms, programming, talent, people, capital and, creativity, and the complication of the core/periphery relationship this entails - one would be hard pressed to find a better example than the recent development in Israeli television. An unlikely “global Cinderella”, the last 15 years have seen Israeli television evolve from a miniscule, marginalize, linguistically isolated, one-channel, public broadcast system into a vibrant and successful media industry with cutting edge expertise in international scripted and unscripted content development.

While Israeli-developed programming concepts are making their way to practically every corner of the world, especially notable is this small industry’s determination to “make it in America”. Achieving that landmark in the scripted area (e.g. In Treatment; Homeland; Hostages) and then using it to pivot into further global success via cutting-edge multiplatform unscripted fare (Rising Star; Sofa King) – Israel’s success in establishing itself as a “TV Nation” stands to teach us something about the reconfiguration of the center-periphery relationship in contemporary “planet TV”.

Given that our theories and histories of television are so overwhelmingly dominated by a U.S./U.K-centered bias, this response invites attendees to contemplate a wider push in global TV Studies for the development of a more trans-nationally oriented framework for understanding contemporary shifts in television as a medium, an industry and a globally interconnected technological and textual system.