

**Implementing the Real: Television and Global Formats**  
Flow Conference Response Paper: Global Television Flows  
Bish Sen, University of Oregon

I think that it is useful to distinguish between two types of global television flows. The first, that I will call *global flow*, refers to the process by virtue of which television content produced *locally* – typically in the west - manages to find a transnational audience. A classic example is that of *Dallas*, but the phenomenon persists even today. Thus, the *New York Times* (Sep 7, 2008) reports that the residents of the Gaza strip are avid consumers of *Prison Break*, *24* and *Friends*. The phenomenon of *global flows* elicits questions of the following sort: Why do only certain shows have cross-cultural appeal? Is it artistic genius or cultural imperialism at play? How do different audiences receive the same content? Can we find instances of reverse flow? (“Yes We Can” - Bollywood, *telenovas*). There exists, however, a very different type of content transfer, one that involves the movement of objects (reality programs for example) that are global by their very nature, universals before they are local. An inquiry into such *global flows*, I suggest, would be very helpful for an understanding of globalization as a whole.

It is evident that Reality TV is the most globalized version of television today- formats like *Big Brother*, *Idol* and *Who Wants to be a Millionaire* (classified as a game show in the US, but, more correctly in my opinion, as reality in other places) have an international presence and popularity far exceeding that of other shows. Reality TV’s significance goes beyond mere reach however; it also provides us with a template of truly *global art* that is irreducible to any local culture or milieu. *Big Brother*, a format that has franchises

in over 70 countries, exemplifies this generality: it is everywhere and everyone's, and the fact that it was first developed in the Netherlands is both contingent and inconsequential. Why are reality shows so uniquely *global*? The answer has to do with form: unlike traditional works of art, reality shows are "thin" on meaning and rich in rules. The guidelines for *Big Brother* reads roughly as follows: Choose 12 contestants; Put them in a house along with a host; Assign some tasks; Arrange some contests; Institute a policy that results in one contestant being eliminated every week; Arrive at the eventual winner by this process; Repeat series with a new set of contestants. This sequence is not a text but a set of instructions and codes that "run" in various contexts in order to *produce* a text – *Big Brother* in Australia, *Bigg Boss* in India. Unlike the artwork, *global* formats do not *have* meaning; they have the *potential* to have meaning. Carrying the lightest of semantic loads they are able to travel effortlessly across geographical and linguistic boundaries and give birth to *local* texts. In doing so they provide us with a finely calibrated account – a calculus – of the impact globalization makes in these contexts. The formula here is *Big Brother* Africa = Africa + globalization. Indeed *global* formats may be characterized as being in a fractal relationship to globalization: the former involves the running of a few universal rules on local game conditions; the latter consists of the administration of a few macro-economic prescriptions (free market philosophy, IMF regulations etc.) on an entire country. In other words, much like the format, globalization too produces a text – not at the level of representation but at that of history. This equivalence promises an epistemological pay-off: the fate of formats can perhaps foretell the destiny of globalization itself.

How would a study of global flows facilitate the dialogue between cultural studies and international communications? The latter tradition has been strong on empirical research and comparative analysis, but would do well to incorporate the theoretical insights and interpretive strategies that cultural studies has to offer, especially when examining how formats get mediated by the specificities of the culture they are implemented in. Cultural studies too will be challenged and expanded by its encounter with global phenomena. We should not forget that cultural studies is, in the last instance, a local theory (or theoretical paradigm) fashioned out of encounter with western popular culture. As a result, its conceptual tools may not always be adequate for understanding cultural production from elsewhere. For example, cultural studies needs to be supplemented by other insights when we analyze Bollywood films or Indian popular music. Lastly, global flow studies ought not be restricted to a single alliance. The advent of digital technology has given rise to a number of alternative approaches – network theory, database analysis, artificial life, theories of emergence, social systems theory – which move away from cultural studies' exclusive focus on representation and textuality. The globe is multiple and so should our endeavor to apprehend it.