

## The History of Television Formal Flows: An Alternative Approach to Television Globalization

Sharon Shahaf, Georgia State University.

Television globalization was, until quite recently, widely discussed in terms of the flow and wide reaching popularity of “canned” or “finished” American programs (Thussu, 2007). However, in recent years, with the dramatic explosion of global television formats and, more specifically, the success of Reality “media event” talent competitions and game shows (e.g. *Pop Idol*, *Big Brother*, *Survivor*,) there is a growing recognition in industry and academic circles that an alternative type of flow - wherein what travels from one national territory to the next aren’t “finished” products, but rather **programming forms**, concepts, or ideas – is becoming increasingly dominant (Moran, 2009; Oren and Shahaf, 2012).

While current formatting practices are products of a new global “media ecology” (Baltruschat, 2010) they also highlight an important yet underexplored **historical** phenomenon that has shaped television as a global textual system from its very early days (Oren and Shahaf, 2012). Thus, outside the U.S and U.K., local experimentation with globally popular forms played a crucial part in shaping virtually every “belated” television systems, whose development came after the establishment of these two dominant Anglo television hubs. Arguably, this type of conceptual or formal flow did more than the popularity of imports like *Dallas* or *Friends* (as finished texts) to shape television as we now encounter it everywhere – a thoroughly globalized yet remarkably locally embedded medium.

For one, local producers in belated television, plagued as they have always been with financial, structural and legal constraints, have also had to contend with their profound marginality while operating in a field defined by the dominance of U.S. and U.K imports. Beyond the obvious direct competition, the presence of imports resulted in a much subtler form of influence as their aesthetic and formal conventions, their subject matter, tone, storytelling practices, and representational strategies, all contributed in shaping local producers’ and audience’s expectations and perceptions of the medium’s proper form and content. This created an inherent experience of local production as belated – a form of marginality that has shaped the way television has been experienced practically everywhere.

Nevertheless, by foregrounding the perspective of these marginalized television systems, this response paper moves **away** from the top-down globalization approach that informs the bulk of the academic debate on global television formats. Severing contemporary format trades from the longer history of formal flows that has shaped television globalization, this common discourse offers a reductive account of what is in reality a highly diverse range of formal exchange - extending from tightly controlled official “franchised” adaptations to more “loose” and unofficial “borrowing,” or influence.

As those of us studying the emergence of production capacities in the margin know full well, the history of formal influence and exchange in the margin includes a much more complex range of cultural and industrial practices than the discourse of formatting as “copycatting” will have us believe. The negotiations surrounding the “inflow” or local adaptation of televisual forms constitute a vibrant field of activity – industrial practices and cultural meaning making – which can provide valuable insight regarding wider processes of cultural globalization and the construction of national/local identity through television. For example, the local rendition of a globally popular form in many cases comes to represent for local audiences not just a homogenizing top-down process of globalization but also their own unique cultural identity. In other words, “their” local version of a globally popular sitcom, soap opera, or reality/game show reflects exactly the ways in which the local culture differs from an imagined “global” or “universal” identity. Time and again local producers discuss the many details that make their program so “different,” and all the ways in which their own version was built from the ground up with local audiences’ cultural tastes and sensitivities in mind, making the global formula into “something of our own”.

Therefore, countering reductive approaches that view “localization” as the cynical profit-driven infusion of “local flavor” to a pre-constituted blend formula – this response suggests shifting the focus from the trade activities of transnational corporates to the role of formal flows in the historical development of “belated” television cultures and industries in the margin. Moreover, beyond revising our perception of the way adaptation works in the margin, I hope we can begin addressing the important generating role it plays in the emergence of local industrial capacity as producers use it to find and hone their own unique voice. This process is now culminating in a series of counter-flows as traditionally marginalized industries such as Holland, Denmark, Colombia and Israel have reached the point where they are able to develop and sell programming ideas to top U.S channels. Thus finally, through formal trades which help transcend linguistic barriers, innovation can originate in the margin and flow to the center. For these reasons I believe that a historical revision of television globalization through the lens of formal flows can help us understand the medium’s contemporary emergence as a locally embedded yet globally integrated textual system.

## Bibliography

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