

Fabricating Cultural Events:

The Rise of International Programme Formats in Norwegian Television Production

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International trade and cooperation are increasingly affecting what we experience in the national and local media. This development is rapidly evolving with live televised events, like Idols and Dancing with the Stars, and here I pursue why (and how) this is so. I engage specifically with the ways in which licensed international programme formats intervene in existing programme traditions, and affect the repertoire and capacity of national television producers. I trace the practices of the two largest Norwegian broadcasters over the last two decades. The question is not only how licensed formats affect different industry sectors, in this case license-funded NRK and commercial TV 2, but also how different units within the broadcasters are impacted. The article calls for heightened sensitivity to new forms of control and collaboration in creative processes, and new routines for premeditating live events. It suggests that format exchange should be evaluated along a continuum from open to closed; a continuum that can bring nuance to discussions of cultural colonisation.

Introduction

Already in the 1950s, the producer of *The \$64,000 Question*, Louis Cowan, was making a good living by developing game show formats and selling production licenses to American broadcasters (Anderson, 1978). However, his reach did not extend beyond the United States. The Norwegian broadcaster NRK made its own version of the program (*Kvitt eller dobbelt*) in 1961, as did its sibling broadcasters in other Nordic countries (Theisen, 1993), and it became a major hit (a version of which is still being produced today). Importantly, the Norwegian producers created their variant without requesting consent or otherwise contacting the original format developer. Forty years later, *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?* (begun in 1998) was produced for ITV (UK) by the international format company Celador and soon became extremely popular. Now, however, when a Norwegian broadcaster (this time TV 2) wanted a version, it bought the format and reproduced it in close association with the format company, as did more than one hundred other broadcasters around the world as well (Moran & Malbon, 2006). So what had changed?

By the 1990s, the television industry had gone global, and its content was being produced and managed in new ways. The deregulation of business and capital flow in the 1980s, consummated by

the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, was followed by the spectacular ascent of global media conglomerates and partnerships (see Steemers, 2004; Albarran et al., 2006; Hesmondhalgh, 2007; Arsenault & Castells, 2008). Media corporations began operating on this global scale as well and found a huge market for proven programme successes (Moran, 1998). Due to the deregulation, commercialisation, and increased competition in television markets worldwide during the 1980s and 1990s, fuelled by new cable and satellite distribution technologies, there was an ever-increasing need to cut the costs of programme development and reduce the risk of failure. It was a perfect storm for the future of the format: there were global agents rising to the task of managing programmes worldwide, a proliferation of television channels in need of content, and the international participation of national television companies interested in trading their own programmes worldwide.

Although television's globalisation process, and thus the growth in the format trade, have spanned decades, formats have only relatively recently become objects of study. For instance, 1990s books like *The Internationalisation of Television* (Negrine & Papathanassopoulos, 1990) and *Global Television* (Barker, 1997) do not even mention formats. While they do receive mention in more recent works, such as *World Television* (Straubhaar, 2007, pp. 181-182, 225) and *The Media Globe* (Artz & Yahya, 2007, see Steemers' chapter, p. 70), it is often only in passing. For a decade, however, Albert Moran (1998, 2004, 2006, forthcoming) has represented a notable exception to the rule with his timely explorations of television formats, and several other scholars have joined him along the way (Keane, 2002; Waisbord, 2004; Jensen, 2007).

Studies of the format-trade phenomenon are often concerned with either overarching industrial transformations or the cultural implications of format adaptation. Recurring themes involve the positive/negative effects of formats on national or regional markets (Jensen, 2007) or their positive/negative effects on national or regional culture (Waisbord, 2004). Yet the actual production processes and outputs involved are seldom scrutinised. Here I attempt to bring some of these issues into focus by asking *how international event-based formats are collaboratively reproduced, and what are their implications for national programme production?* What I call event-based formats encompass the programme forms that have come to dominate the format trade, including game-show/reality-show hybrids. I have an explorative approach and start out by assessing some of the new format agencies, and some key characteristics of their formats. Then I move on to the arrival of these international formats in national broadcasters, evaluating their impact on output and on the internal workings of the organisations. Lastly I suggest some overarching implications to the creative process of programme production. The material of this article is based on my doctoral thesis, *Event Media* (Kjus, 2009a), for which I conducted in-depth case studies of event-based formats. In my approach to *Idols* (first produced in 2001) and *Great X* (first produced in 2002), which are successful formats that are still being reproduced, I combined observations of production and interviews of professionals with analyses of output. The findings of these specific case studies are published elsewhere (Kjus, 2009b; 2009c). Here I aim for a broader picture of the programme format and its state at the end of the 2000s: the decade when the phenomenon fully made its arrival.

A growing variety of agents and formats

Commercial and public service companies both, and hybrids of the two, have increasingly engaged in format exchange. Some have become global suppliers, some have become steady buyers, and some both sell and buy. My case study of *Idols* and *Great X* brought me in contact with media companies developing their capacities in these respects. I will begin by presenting Fremantlemedia and BBC Worldwide, which have rapidly become prominent global players. Later, I will present two Norwegian broadcasters, NRK and TV 2, which increasingly depend on them.

Fremantlemedia is the content and production division of RTL Group, Europe's largest TV, radio and production company (which is in turn owned by the global media conglomerate Bertelsmann). RTL formed Fremantlemedia in 2000 by buying and then merging established production companies with a long track record in the international format trade, including Pearson Television, which had already itself bought competitor Grundy Television in 1995. Fremantlemedia has since been one of the very largest format players (trumped only by Endemol; see Moran & Malbon, 2006, p. 94), managing, for example, *The Apprentice*, *Idols*, *Got Talent*, and *X-Factor* in territories all over the world. In the countries where Fremantlemedia maintains offices (Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States), the company produces programmes in house; otherwise, it sells format licenses to national television broadcasters, preferably the largest ones, and provides (considerable) production assistance and regulation.

BBC Worldwide is the commercial subsidiary of BBC, which was formed in the restructuring of BBC Enterprises in 1995 as a response to deregulation and increasing commercial pressure. BBC Worldwide invests in BBC programmes, thus contributing to the BBC's funding, and in turn receives the rights to market and sell them abroad. For a long time, BBC Worldwide's income derived mainly from selling finished (or "canned") programmes, although the practice of investing and trading in formats and concepts was already up and running in the early 1990s. In the 2000s, however, following major hits like *The Weakest Link* (2000-) and *Dancing with the Stars* (2004-), the format trade picked up substantially, and in 2005 a separate BBC Worldwide business unit called Content and Production was created to "maximise the potential for formats."² From 2004/5 to 2008/9, BBC Worldwide's sales of formats rose from £13.2 million to £83.8 million (it grew even during the recent economic recession). During the same period, its sales of finished programmes rose only from £171 million to £195.3 million, which points to the speed with which formats are gaining in significance.

Because of the significant business potential behind a successful format, companies invest a substantial amount of money in creating them. Big conglomerates have the greatest resources for both developing and marketing formats, and therefore the most successful ones tend to be controlled by a few big players (Moran & Malbon, 2006, pp. 71-84). Several million dollars (or pounds or euros) are invested in a given format by the time it reaches audience screens, with TV professionals engaging in creative development, pilots, run-throughs, tests, focus groups and so on. The formats are then further refined in producer networks and conferences, and this polishing work is in fact an important reason for their success.

Formats succeed as well due to quota regulations for mother-tongue broadcasting and the superior attraction of locally produced content (Keane, 2002; Waisbord, 2004; Steemers, 2007).

Formats are reproduced in individual national settings and therefore reflect language, culture and temperament in a way that programmes already completed elsewhere cannot. The standardisation, protection and marketing of formats worldwide have led media professionals (as well as scholars) to speak of formats in terms of brands, like Coca-Cola. However, the “brand” term primarily reflects the business dimensions of these formats, not the practices, competencies and experience needed to make these programmes work in very different national settings. International formats actors also manage these aspects of formats, intruding upon the hermeneutics of national programme production in various ways and affecting the processes through which previous production experience informs the current production.

The complexity of this “interference” is masked by the simplistic industry distinction between scripted and unscripted formats, however. The former contains scripts for the characters’ speech and typically involves fictional series like *The Office*. Reality formats, and what I here call event formats, are unscripted, on the other hand, because the speech and actions of participants are explicitly meant to be unpredictable. They are obviously most adaptable to local conditions and typically engage numerous local participants and local takes on themes (work, leisure, love, music, dance and so on). These formats are often broadcast live, or as if they were live (including, among other things, convincing time manipulations; see, for example, Kavka & West, 2005), which is important for making them objects of “water-cooler conversations” as “must-see TV” (Hesmondhalgh, 2007, p. 291). Their live, day-to-day unfolding also accommodates the portioning out of content to new media platforms, online and mobile, as well as the generating of massive publicity from surrounding media companies and emerging online media ecologies, including user-based content sites like YouTube and Facebook. Event formats therefore have qualities that make them particularly valuable to broadcasters who must adapt to new technological and competitive circumstances.

However, these “unscripted” and “live” qualities also represent significant production challenges. In order to compensate for the unpredictability and uncertainty of the event format, producers employ a wide range of production tools and documents to control quality and make sure that events unfold in the desired way. It is therefore misleading to call them unscripted, and Ytreberg (2006) examines how reality formats like *Big Brother* in fact employ a range of production scripts defining social settings and temporal sequencing that are intended to give interactions and performances an “unscripted feel” (ibid., p. 424). Industry executives are also aware of the increasing variety of premeditative practices associated with “unscripted” formats, so Mark Harrison, producer of many television shows and now head of the BBC Arts Division, refers to reality gameshows like *The Apprentice* as “invisible formats” (interviewed, 29 June 2006): “You can clock each dramatic curve in *The Apprentice* almost down to the second. I am awestruck by the level of precision and sophistication of several recent formats.”

The formats that become the biggest and most profitable hits are likely to have been subjected to their companies’ most comprehensive refinement and protection, and this increasingly includes online and mobile media applications, such as website designs, as well. These formats have existed for some time as reality/event shows (Schmitt et al., 2005), and companies tend to have a few particularly successful ones. For Fremantlemedia, *Idols*, *X-Factor*, *Got Talent* and *Farmer Wants a*

Wife are included among what they call “the big classics,” those that format consultant Sheldon Bailey (interviewed, 26 March 2008) observes have the capacity to become huge successes all over the world. BBC Worldwide has its own set of hits, among which *Dancing with the Stars*, *Great Britons*, *The Weakest Link*, *Friends Like These*, and *Antiques Roadshow* ranked highly in 2005.³ Several of these, and other, formats have made their way to Norwegian broadcasters and have gradually impacted their practices, be they commercial or public-service oriented.

The arrival of event formats in Norway

Global format actors affect national television production in a number of ways, involving each of the different levels of a television company: management, middle management and the production team (Ytreberg, 1999, p. 25). Within this general structure of responsibilities (which is applicable for companies in other media sectors as well), the management is responsible for commissioning programmes and for the overarching output strategies (channels/schedules). The middle management is responsible for organising production, working more directly with specific outputs (slots/programme concepts), and functioning as an interface with the production teams. The production team produces the various content units (segments/episodes/programmes) managed by the hierarchy above it.

So, within this hierarchy, management is responsible for channel and medium profiles, including the key work of scheduling and commissioning suitable programmes. Format actors therefore have become important collaborators with management, especially since the latter is also responsible for company investments, and formats are promising ones. The big format actors, which are often part of even bigger media conglomerates, have a rich assortment of formats that carry with them considerable production experience. They can therefore offer programmes, programme packages and scheduling expertise to accommodate the strategic aims of management officials at individual broadcasters.

The rise (and the effects) of these collaborations are clearly reflected in the programme schedules of the largest television companies in Norway, NRK and TV 2. NRK is a traditional licence-funded public service broadcaster, founded in 1933, whereas TV 2 began its commercial broadcasts in 1992 (it is a so-called hybrid broadcaster that is entirely commercially financed but satisfies certain public service obligations). I have prepared an overview of their weekend primetime programming from 1993 to 2009 (see table 1).⁴ The weekend represents an important time for domestic and social leisure activities; because weekend primetime has attracted large audiences for decades now, it is strategically very important to broadcasters (Syvertsen, 1997; Ytreberg, 1999). These slots are most likely to be affected by costly event formats as well. Broadcasters often have one or two key attractions placed between 8:00 pm and 9:30 pm on Friday and Saturday nights, and I have selected the programme that fills the greater part of this slot for my overview. Broadcasters also tend to keep a programme attraction in this slot for most, if not all, of each television season (spring and autumn), and I have therefore included the main show of each broadcaster at mid-season (March and October, respectively). Table 1 below presents the results (it uses Norwegian programme titles

	NRK				TV 2			
	Spring season		Fall season		Spring season		Fall season	
	Friday	Saturday	Friday	Saturday	Friday	Saturday	Friday	Saturday
2009	Showbiz (Singing office)	Den store klassefesten	Beat for beat (The lyrics board)	De ukjente (Who's who?)	Norske talenter (Got talent)	Det store korslaget	X-Factor	Skal vi danse? (Dancing with the stars)
2008	Showbiz	Den store klassefesten	Beat for beat	Kvitt eller dobbelt	Norske talenter	Farmen '(The farm)	Vil du bli millionær? (Who wants to be a millionaire?)	Skal vi danse?
2007	Beat for beat	Topp ti	Beat for beat	Lyden av lørdag	Deal or no deal	Farmen	Idol	Skal vi danse?
2006	Beat for beat	Tore på sporet	På tråden med Synnøve	Kjempe-sjansen	Idol	Alle mot en	Skal vi danse?	Deal or no deal
2005	Memo	Den store klassefesten	Beat for beat	Den store klassefesten	Idol	Hilde og Brede	Filmstjerne	Klisterhjerne
2004	Venne-prøven	Hodejegerne	Beat for beat	Noen bedre	Idol	God morgen Norge	Farmen	God morgen Norge
2003	Venne-prøven	Hodejegerne	Beat for beat	Lørdan	Idol	De syv søstre	Tommys popshow	Klisterhjerne
2002	TVT	Hodejegerne	Beat for beat	Tore på sporet	Vil du bli millionær?	Oles Ark	Vil du bli millionær?	Mot i brystet
2001	Beat for beat	Den store klassefesten	Beat for beat	Den store klassefesten	Vil du bli millionær?	Vil du bli millionær?	Vil du bli millionær?	Numme og Gundersen
2000	Beat for beat	Den store klassefesten	Åpent hus	Tore på sporet	Vil du bli millionær?	De syv søstre	Vil du bli millionær?	Gladiatorene
1999	I hum-mels vold	Noteknekk	OJ—en utstrakt hånd	Øystein og meg	Rebusløpet	De syv søstre	TV 2000	Film (Olsen-banden)
1998	Wiese	På'n igjen	Falske forbindelser	Ja, vi elsker	Stol aldri på en kjendis	De syv søstre	Stjerner i sikte (European soundmix show)	De syv søstre
1997	Gringos	Talentiaden	VeraVera	Tore på sporet	Jakten på det gode liv	Hollywoods menn	Stjerner i sikte	De syv søstre
1996	Wiese	Noteknekk	Wiese	Sveip	Takk skal du ha	Film (Olsen-banden)	Stjerner i sikte	De syv søstre
1995	Rondo	Æres den som æres bør	Sveip	Skal, skal ikke ...	Chili	Film (varied)	RiksDan	Err'u gær'n
1994	Scala	Kvitt eller dobbelt	Rondo	Opp med Norge!	Gunnar alias Andersen	Film (varied)	Oppdraget	Film (Olsen-banden)
1993	Rondo	Klar, ferdig, jobb!	Endelig fredag	Rett hjem!	TV-Flax	London brenner	Scene 2	Film (Norwegian)

Table 1. Primetime weekend programming on NRK and TV 2 from 1993 to 2009.

but includes original format titles in parentheses when first listed). The programmes in grey cells are based on purchased format licenses.

What is most striking about this overview is the fact that both NRK and TV 2 suddenly began to depend more on licensed formats at the turn of the century, and how those formats were accompanied by increasing schedule standardisation. However, whereas NRK (in the selected slots) has stuck with a handful of formats through the 2000s (including *Beat for Beat/The Lyrics Board*, *Klassefesten* and *Hodejegerne*), TV 2 has incorporated many more new format trends (from *Vil du bli millionær?/Who Wants to be a Millionaire?* and *Idol/Idols* to *Skal vi danse?/Dancing with the Stars*, *Norske talenter/Got Talent* and *X-Factor*). Along the way, TV 2 has increasingly challenged the traditional dominance of NRK in weekend primetime, and in those selected slots TV 2 has almost doubled its ratings from 1999 to 2009 at the expense of NRK (though NRK still leads overall, according to www.tns-gallup.no). *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?* (2000-) began this gradual invasion of weekend primetime and was followed by *Idols* (2003-), which was incredibly successful and influenced subsequent programming considerably.

In the Friday night slot, TV 2 has scheduled live entertainment shows ever since it started up in 1992, such as the talk show *Riksdan* and the talent contest *European Soundmix Show (Stjerner i sikte)*. *Idols*, however, combines talk show and contest elements with docusoap-like human interest stories in an event that spans an entire season. *Idols*, in fact a natural extension of previous programming, gave TV 2 the confidence to introduce similar formats in the Saturday night slot, which had been traditionally thoroughly dominated by NRK. Through the 1990s and well into the 2000s, TV 2 primarily scheduled fiction (TV-series and films) and reruns there, but in recent years the slot has been dominated by event-based entertainment formats such as *Dancing with the Stars*, *The Farm*, and *Deal or No Deal*.

Thus programming is turning from the taped toward the live, a development that resonates with the earlier findings of Caldwell (1995) and Bourdon (2000), who observed that a “liveness aesthetic” came to accompany the increased media competition of the 1980s and 1990s. They also noted at that time that live-to-air television already represented an unfulfilled promise—the “live” was in fact primarily faked (and pre-taped) for both economic and logistical reasons. Many recent event formats such as *Idols*, *Dancing with the Stars*, and *X-Factor*, however, are in fact largely produced live-to-air. Their key moments are “fully live” using the terminology of Bourdon, whereas *Deal or No Deal* and *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?* represent “continuity liveness” (taped in advance but broadcast as a real-time event) and *The Farm* and *Farmer Wants a Wife* represent “edited liveness” (taped in advance but broadcast as unfolding continuously throughout the season). The rise in live-to-air transmissions has a strategic rationale (as did the rise in live simulations), and the gains of going live seem increasingly to override its costs and risks. In order to challenge NRK in strategic slots, TV 2 actually needs the imperativeness and immediacy of live-to-air events and their spillover gains in both external and internal media. Apart from attracting massive publicity, their immediacy dovetails with the strategic encouragement of audience participation (which depends upon live transmission for direct feedback) and its benefits in terms of loyalty and revenues (see also Enli,

2007). A desire for continuous consumption has spurred key developments in television production and aesthetics over the years (Williams, 1974; Syvertsen, 1997), for which Bourdon (2000) considers all forms of liveness beneficial. However, real-time events not only create continuity in vertical as well as horizontal TV schedules, but also best accommodate new media, online and mobile, in their ongoing experience.

The overview indicates the increasing reliance of broadcaster management on licensed formats, and TV 2's entry into the format business, and particularly their acquisition of big event formats (the "big classics"), has proved very significant in terms of their strategic goals. Formats have also been important for NRK, as several of them (particularly *Have I Got News for You*, *The Lyrics Board*, and *Klassefesten*) attract weekend audiences more effectively than do the local programming alternatives. Licensed formats have also been vital to succeed in extending programme services to new media (NRK 2002), and *Test the Nation* (2003, 2004), *Test your Vote* (2005), and *Test your Love* (2006), for instance, all boosted online traffic for NRK considerably.

However, the format trend does present NRK with certain dilemmas in terms of its obligations as a public service broadcaster. Public service legitimacy is closely linked to promoting originality, creativity and diversity, but also to retaining an alliance with broad sections of the audience (Lowe & Jauert, 2005). The use of licensed formats reflects the conflict in this eternal balancing act, particularly in the context of increasing media competition. In the case of NRK, management for some time has been growing rather addicted to licensed formats with regard to improving market share.⁵ Another challenge to the coveted independence of the public service broadcaster lies in the control that format companies, particularly major ones, tend to exert over programmes. Public service broadcasters have a responsibility to both accommodate and stimulate national culture and identity, which can conflict with absorbing global formats or submitting to international production regulations. Moreover, successful formats are getting rather expensive for public service budgets, and the notion of spending citizens' license fees on the formats of global conglomerates can be unsettling. Yet another challenge lies in the great commercial potential for new media, including online advertising and merchandising, which many large formats now incorporate. This potential runs counter to the ideals and practices of traditional public service broadcasters. Format holders, on their side, often claim a share of new media revenues and prefer to partner with agents that fully exploit these new income sources. These are some of the reasons why NRK has not bought any of the big international formats of recent years, and traditional values of independence and non-commercialism also partly explain why NRK has not become a format developer/trader itself (though it attempted to do so in 2002-2003).⁶

In many respects, it suits NRK's ideology and self-conception better not to buy or copy other programmes, but rather to harvest inspiration from abroad and create independent national versions, as it has traditionally done (Theisen, 1993). With regard to *Great Britons*, for example, NRK's posture was that a programme idea, in this case the celebratory election of a national champion, cannot be patented. The legal issues of programme formats are in fact fraught with such uncertainties, because the commodity in question straddles the borderline between general ideas and finished works (see Moran & Malbon, 2006, pp. 111-142). Social encounters and interactions defy

restrictions, obviously, though logos, studio designs and music themes just as obviously submit to them. So although NRK's version was similar to BBC's on several points, it was arguably not illegal. However, in the case of complex projects like *Great Norwegians*, there might be other reasons for collaborating with format companies, to which I will return later.

For TV 2, the objections that NRK raises about formats are instead virtues, in terms of standardisation, predictability and new media revenues. The company is therefore increasingly cooperating with global format actors as well as commercial broadcasters in neighboring countries in order to obtain (and benefit the most from) formats. Also unlike NRK, TV 2 proudly embraces revenues via online and mobile media. The former director of TV 2 Interactive, Gunnar Stavrum (interviewed, 26 April 2007), is keenly aware that the large event formats with substantial live elements have a superior capacity for creating traffic and consumption on new media. And according to Rolf Wenell, project leader in TV 2's Programme Department (interviewed, 4 December 2007), the last three years have seen a shift in what he and his colleagues seek in a format: now, a decisive factor is exactly that format's anticipated ability to engage audiences in new media.

However, the regulations of format companies sometimes also conflict with the interests of commercial broadcasters, not least in terms of those new media, for which the formats increasingly include their own templates and standards. Format holders tend not only to demand a license for each media template (typically a website set-up) from the broadcaster, but also a percentage of its revenues. According to Gunnar Stavrum, this can be frustrating, especially since the "official programme website" often musters up much less traffic than the unofficial and more gossipy coverage that TV 2 can create on its own online media (Kjus, 2009b). On their side, format holders want to protect their formats from bad publicity (for future profits), while profiting as much as possible from each reproduction. Differences arise between the actors in terms of editorial freedom and revenue flow.

Middle management and production teams

When management buys a format, middle management becomes the interface between the management/format holder, on the one hand, and the production team, on the other. Middle management's responsibility for central conceptual and textual priorities (Ytreberg, 1999, p. 25) translates in this case into responsibility for handling the format and adapting it to local conditions, both culturally and in terms of production resources. For the first local reproduction of a format, this adaptation happens with the close collaboration of the format consultants, whereas subsequent contact will be looser and depends more on the issues that might arise (at least that is the general experience of my informants). One of the measures taken by the format holder is to have executive producers in one country assist reproductions in another country with somewhat similar conditions (in 2007, for instance, TV 2 received a visit from Bulgarian TV executives who were also about to produce *Idols* on a relatively low budget). For formats that have proven potential across time as well as space—such as Fremantlemedia's "big classics"—this kind of networking has picked up substantially. Fremantlemedia, for instance, annually arranges get-togethers for *Idols* producers around

the world to learn from each other. Public service broadcasters also have a tradition of producer networking, with executives openly exchanging programme ideas and experiences (arranged, for instance, by the European Broadcasting Union, see www.ebu.ch/en/hr_training), but not on the scale of current format enterprises. The open sharing of programme concepts and know-how is likely to decrease as public service agents increasingly become format traders themselves.

Producer networks are important to the success of programme formats in different countries. NRK's decision not to buy the *Great X* format from BBC in 2005, for instance, reduced the programme's potential: it disconnected the producers from the essential know-how that buying broadcasters received with regard to coordinating media platforms, managing audience participation and creating public excitement (Kjus, 2007).

The regular production team members are typically not included in format producer networks and therefore do not participate in the creative exchanges taking place there. Ironically, most of the new formats increase the participation of Norwegian audiences, but reduce the participation of Norwegian producers. For them, formats primarily mean an extensive set of production regulations, the strictness of which varies from format to format. As mentioned, event formats are designed to come across as unscripted and unpredictable, which ironically entails a range of regulations, including contest rules, set design (including light/sound/camera settings), running order and editing instructions. Production teams thus become experts of sorts in handling given formats, and because big event formats like *Idols* actually span an entire year, the same personnel often reappear annually. However, those teams can become correspondingly unskilled in other forms of production. Mark Harrison, head of the BBC's Arts Division, is highly concerned about the fact that many television producers now work only with formats and therefore lack originality and independence. In this last section, I will address how the format trend influences the television industry as a supplier of cultural experiences to its audience.

Implications for national television

Large-event formats are scheduled during some of the most important slots of the national TV channels, and they are also among the most resource-intensive productions for old as well as new media. They are therefore important to broadcasters as well as the audience and society at large, and they thus raise one of the great recurring questions of format research: do international formats threaten or enrich the national media and culture? Some researchers tend toward the notion of media imperialism, within which formats "are thought to have fatal consequences for local cultures such as a higher degree of trivialisation, standardisation and vulgarity" (Jensen, 2007 p. 34; see also Gordon, 2009). Influence is here envisioned as flowing from center to periphery, promoting big corporate interests as well as liberal consumer values. However, research also indicates counterflows within the vast and complex network of global television (Cunningham et al., 1998), and scholars have also pointed out how formats can incorporate and uphold national language and culture (Waisbord, 2004).

Production studies can in fact contribute something to the debate. As we have seen, licensed

formats enter into the hermeneutic processes of national television production on different levels. Whereas the continuous, serialized production of television used to be based on the decisions and judgement of local producers, it is now increasingly based on international format actors, who expect to collaborate on management's scheduling, middle management's conceptual priorities and the production team's actual work. This collaboration can weaken the local production end. Independence, knowhow and creativity suffer, as the national producers depend less on their own experiences than those of others. International formats transfer key parts of the hermeneutic process to a global level, which introduces the possibility that traditional ways of accommodating local culture and society are gradually eroded. Depending on their rigidity, international formats will interfere with the genre practices that broadcasters have developed over the years. That is not to say that formats necessarily disregard local culture, which is often requisite to their success, but that the range of programme forms and practices directed to local conditions can be highly constrained.

Thus the rigidity of formats and format holders are very relevant to their larger cultural and industrial impact. In the overview above, NRK's formats, including *The Lyrics Board* and *Have I Got News for You*, are generally more open and allow for more variation than do TV 2's formats, including *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?* and *Idols*. Terms of exchange also vary considerably (see Keane, 2002; Jensen, 2007). Ideas or assistance from producers abroad certainly can be altogether positive, helping local producers to understand their own situation better and improving their perspective. In the case of *Great X*, for instance, the format consultants were highly concerned with assisting the national broadcaster in understanding how to address their public across media platforms (Kjus, 2007). The crucial point is how collaboration is organised, and problems usually arise when local producers are cut off from the processes of gaining experience and making decisions. For commercial enterprises, it is perhaps sensible to keep these processes hidden in order to protect the format as a commodity, which is why the local producers of *Idols* must sign a contract promising never to show the format bible to anyone outside the production. Kitley (2004, p. 154) even calls formats "intellectual capital" that is rented and in fact so entrenched that "any training or educational benefit they pass on is incidental, not central."

Considering the variety of co-operations in programme production, this may be too negative—perhaps format transfers can be envisioned along a continuum from open to closed, paralleling the difference between the gift economy (Cheal, 1988) and the market economy. Within public service broadcasting there is, as mentioned earlier, a tradition of exchanging programme ideas and experiences without monetary charge, like gifts. However, these exchanges entail other gains and obligations, including the mutual upholding of the public service merit/status as well as compensating favours at later points. At the other end of the spectrum, in the market economy, returns are purely monetary and the format exchange is regulated to maximise them. Formats also vary considerably; some are seen to be highly dependent on the competence of local producers, whereas others are seen to benefit from strict centralised control. The control exerted by format distributors affects the work of national broadcasting, from the level of management down to the level of production teams. Generally speaking, open exchange is being supplanted by licensed formats, within public service as well as in purely commercial enterprises. This was apparent to NRK during their realisa-

tion of *Great X*: any form of assistance from the BBC would now require a license purchased from the commercial subsidiary BBC Worldwide. The confinement of dialogue is one expression of how television production is decreasingly based on genres and increasingly based on licensed formats. Genres are conventions that are developed and shared by groups of people, which no one owns and which are broad enough to allow considerable individuality and originality. Licensed formats, on the other hand, are based on a notion of ownership and a strictly defined product. For the public, the shift from genres to formats has been gradual and hidden behind the scenes, but it is still a shift that is essential to understanding television today.

I have here argued that an awareness of exchange practices and formats is important for the analysis of cultural effects and a perspective on whether local television production is colonised or enriched by them. For further explorations of these issues, and issues of global media culture in general, production studies of formats represent a promising approach. Of course, this is a rapidly evolving area of practice, not least in terms of the production of new media. New media have for some time been only moderately included in format regulations, but this is changing fast, along with the overall media revenue streams. Making the most of programmes on new media is also being increasingly prioritised by broadcasters, who aspire to become full-fledged media houses. Formatting is proliferating and is likely to define the coming decade and its media even more than the one that is soon to end.

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Notes

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2. See <http://www.bbcworldwide.com/annualreviews/review2006/contentprod.htm> and <http://www.bbcworldwide.com/annualreviews/review2009> (accessed 20 July 2009).
3. See http://www.bbcworldwide.com/annualreviews/review2005/bus_tvsales_04.htm (accessed 12 May 2009).
4. My sources are *Programbladet/TV Guiden*, executive producer Andreas Diesen in NRK, executive producer Rolf Wenell in TV 2, and head of TV 2's Programme Department Nils Ketil Andresen. Because of my selection criteria, several important and highly popular primetime programmes are not included in the list, such as the licensed satirical talkshow format *Nytt på nytt/Have I Got News for You* (1999-), and the late night talkshows *Først og sist* (2000-2007) on NRK and *Senkveld* (2003-) on TV 2. Moreover, in the nineties, scheduling through the season varied more, and the programmes airing in March and October, respectively, are then to a lesser extent representative for the entire spring/autumn season.
5. This defensive approach, which is reflected by the favouring of a few limited programmes and programme hosts over the years, is repeatedly criticised by media commentators. Still, for the slots in question, the current strategy seems to buttress NRK's legitimacy well.
6. The initiative was called ME-RK and entailed a partnership with commercial actors, but it failed.