

Transnationalisation of television programming in the Iberoamerican region

A transnacionalização de programas televisivos na região ibero-americana

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ABSTRACT

Conceptualisations such as *cultural imperialism* or *global culture* which concern themselves with supposed homogenising tendencies in cultural globalisation fail to account for the gravitational pull and heterogenising effect of the local. Just as McDonald's find they absolutely must offer vegetarian hamburgers in India, in global television studies we have become familiar with a full-blown transnational trade in formats, in which homogenisation proceeds through heterogenisation: that is, in the adaptation of program formulas in accordance with the imperatives of local cultures. This action demonstrates the management of an irreducible paradox of transnationalisation: homogenisation *versus* heterogenisation.

Keywords: Cultural globalisation, transnationalisation, television, television formats

RESUMO

Noções como as de *imperialismo cultural* ou *cultura global*, relacionadas a supostas tendências de homogeneização da globalização cultural, pecam por desconsiderar o efeito heterogeneizador do local. Tal como a rede McDonald's entende ser necessário oferecer hambúrgueres vegetarianos na Índia, os estudos de televisão global nos familiarizam com um mercado transnacional de formatos televisivos, no qual a homogeneização procede através da heterogeneização: isto é, através da adaptação de fórmulas de programas de acordo com os imperativos das culturas locais. Esta ação demonstra o gerenciamento de um paradoxo inerente à transnacionalização: homogeneização *versus* heterogeneização.

Palavras-chave: Globalização cultural, transnacionalização, televisão, formatos televisivos

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JEAN CHALABY IDENTIFIES three paradigms in the development of global communication (2005). The first is internationalisation, or nation-to-nation communication, as in the era of physically trading canned programs. The second is globalisation, which arises with the advent of communication satellites and other technologies able to distribute the same content electronically across borders to many nations, and more or less at the same time, as with the advent of global news services. Of course, such global content has to be received in forms modified to suit the demands of different geolinguistic regions: CNN versus CNN en Español, for instance. The third paradigm is transnationalisation, a new stage in which a greater or lesser degree of ‘glocalisation’ occurs: the selective local borrowing and adaptation of global ideas and cultural forms, and that includes the commercial exchange of scripts and the rights to produce certain formats. This paper will seek to demonstrate that in this current era, there is ever greater and more complex trade of programming within the Iberoamerican cultural-linguistic space, with new production centres and patterns of exchange establishing themselves, though not without the help of global corporations forming alliances with the major regional players. The argument will also be made that linguistic affinity is not enough in itself to ensure the welcome reception of programming from one national market to another – cultural differences remain a real barrier. The apparent capacity of format exchange to cross this cultural barrier by assimilating the global model to national cultural characteristics shows the management of an irreducible paradox of transnationalisation: homogenisation versus heterogenisation.

In a shrewdly perceptive article on the international format trade, Silvio Waisbord once observed: “Formats reflect the globalization of the economics of the television industry and the persistence of national cultures in a networked world” (2004, 368). The format trade in that perspective provides an ideal frame within which to explore the multiple zones of consumption (as well as of production and exchange) which are to be found between the global and the local. In this paper, we will look at the format trade, principally that of telenovelas, within the Spanish-speaking world, understood as a “geolinguistic region” (Sinclair et al., 1996; Sinclair, 1999). More than merely a “geo-political descriptor” (Pertierra and Turner, 2013: 133), the concept of geolinguistic region enables us to see the totality of a global zone constituted not merely by the contiguous national territories of Latin America and the far-flung national space of Spain, but also by the sub-national cultural-linguistic market of “Latinos” in the United States, and indeed, Spanish-speakers anywhere else in the world who have satellite or internet access to television from those places, via ‘global narrowcasting’ (Sinclair and Cunningham, 2001: 3).

With the steady globalisation of the television industry, formats have become a prominent means by which programs successful in one national market can be transformed, hopeful for success in others. Michele Hilmes identifies four basic types of international television exchange: imported series, adapted series, format fiction and reality formats. Historically, the imported series has been the pre-eminent form of television trade, where a program is physically transported in a can, and if required, dubbed or subtitled. Its foreign origins are unconcealed, and it is received as a closed text. Secondly, the adapted series is where a program is remade to suit a different cultural, though not necessarily linguistic, context, while remaining close to the key elements of the original. Although such transformation is often made to cross the fundamental barrier of language difference, of more interest in this paper are instances where programs have been remade from one country to another within the same geolinguistic region. The US version of the BBC original of *The Office*, for example, serves as a ready reminder that although the English-speaking world is the greatest geolinguistic region of all, there are still cultural differences within it which must be dealt with in the cause of commercial success. Format fiction, Hilmes' third category, is of most interest here, having the greatest openness to textual and other kinds of transformation: 'extreme adaptation', as can be seen in the case of some of the many global manifestations of *Yo soy Betty, la fea*, also known in its English-language version as *Ugly Betty*. Finally, reality formats refer to quiz and game shows, as well as contests of all kinds, which tend to stay close to the original formula (Hilmes, 2013: 35-41).

As Waisbord argues, the globalisation of the television industry, meaning the privatisation, deregulation, and general neoliberalisation of the last few decades has not led to the homogenisation of content on offer. On the contrary, the international television trade has had to deal with the reality of cultural-linguistic differences between one market and the next, so the rise of the format is a kind of proof of "the fact that television still remains tied to local and national cultures" (2004: 360). From the global industry's point of view, the problems are "How to combine specificity and diversity, how to get "local" audiences interested in material from other localities, how to build markets that are ever broader without losing the local underpinnings that insure an effective audience" (Mato, 2005: 439). The format is the solution to these problems. For broadcasters, the acquisition of internationally-available formats is almost always cheaper than producing or commissioning original local programming, certainly in the case of fiction, and additionally, imported formats come with a track record from elsewhere, which minimises the inherent commercial risk in television production. Furthermore, since globalisation has

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enabled producers and distributors to maintain greater surveillance over what is shown in foreign markets and to press for greater control over copyright, the unauthorised “copycatting” (Moran, 1998) common in the past, though by no means eradicated, is nevertheless more readily exposed and prosecuted. There has thus developed a relatively more stable basis for an international format trade, and this has encouraged its growth.

Looking at the format phenomenon from the consumption or audience side of the equation, it has long been recognised in television studies that audiences are resistant to programs from different cultural-linguistic zones. Hoskins and Mirus identified the “cultural discount” which English-speaking audiences in particular apply to foreign material, a natural trade barrier enjoyed by the global Anglophone market. More recently, on the basis of accumulated research findings on every continent, Joe Straubhaar’s more universal and nuanced formulation of “cultural proximity” has acquired something like an axiomatic status: “audiences will tend to prefer that programming which is closest or most proximate to their own culture: national programming if it can be supplied by the local economy, regional programming in genres that small countries cannot afford” (1992: 14-15).

However, it is worth making the point that such a notion of cultural proximity, even when bolstered by modifying concepts of genre, value and thematic proximity, should not necessarily be applied to entire national audiences (Straubhaar, 2007). Just as the idea of “national culture” casts a constructed unity over an actual differentiated sociocultural reality in most nations, national audiences, even when they form a majority of the population, are also differentiated: “people live in different milieus, pursue different lifestyles and belong to different communities” (Mikos and Perrotta, 2012: 84). Furthermore, the “national audience” for one program is unlikely to be constituted by the same people as for another. Indeed, many nations have strong local television stations, or even provincial networks, which contradict the all-too-common assumption that no distinction needs to be made between “the national” and “the local”. The case of Spanish-language television in the US, where there are actually two networks with national reach, is a pertinent case in point, or the various minority language stations in some European countries, such as the “autonomous community” stations broadcasting in Catalan, Galician, and so on, in Spain.

Without entering the debate about how far the advent of the multi-channel environment, time- and platform-shifting, and transborder access or global narrowcasting have fragmented television audiences, we know already from the “golden age” of television that the complex differential distribution of economic and cultural capital means that not everyone can access the same television, nor

do they want to. As Straubhaar explains, his research shows how social class factors have a powerful impact upon access to certain kinds of television, and the taste for it: the upper classes like to watch global programming on pay-TV, and can afford to, while it is the “popular classes” who embrace national and local programming (2007).

Nevertheless, the concept of cultural proximity provides a useful explanation of the elements that constitute the barriers that programming must deal with in crossing from one nation to another. Language is “the clearest line of demarcation”, but also “ethnic appearance, dress, style, humor, historical reference, and shared topical knowledge” (Straubhaar, 2007: 26). As Waisbord observes, rather understatedly, beyond language, “It is not easy to pin down exactly what it is that audiences prefer about domestic content” (2004: 370). However, he also argues that “Because formats explicitly empty out signs of the national, they can become nationalized – that is, customized to domestic cultures” (Ibid.: 368). Domestic producers do this by fitting “local narratives, histories, humour, events, and characters into the basic formulas that they purchase” (Ibid.: 371). Language, however, retains its primacy over these other factors not only because it is the very vehicle of culture, but because it is just so obvious as to be taken for granted. The everyday, banal experience of watching television programs in one’s vernacular “continue[s] to anchor a sense of cultural belonging” to the nation (Ibid.: 373). Accordingly, imported programming must be rendered into the language of the receiving market if it is to attract audiences in the same way as national and local programming.

We know that Spanish is a world language, though with major variations, and the official language of Latin American nations from Mexico to Argentina, with the very significant exception of Portuguese-speaking Brazil. In television, Mexico bears a relationship to the geolinguistic region of Spanish largely comparable to that of the US within the English-speaking world. This has been established over decades, not only through the sustained successful exporting of programs from the Mexican media behemoth Televisa, but also because Mexico played an “entrepôt” role in dubbing US television programs and films for the rest of Latin America for many years (Tunstall, 1977: 183). So, Mexican Spanish enjoys the same kind of culturally-proximate familiarity in Latin America, and the Spanish-speaking US, as American English does in, for instance, Australia, and elsewhere in the Anglophone geolinguistic region. As a corollary, Mexican audiences are accustomed to hearing their own accent on television, and are as resistant to programs from other Spanish-speaking countries as US audiences are to British or Australian ones. Not surprisingly, for instance, that Anna Pertierra reports that her respondents in Chetumal, Mexico, found nothing to

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challenge their sense of national belonging when watching television (Pertierra and Turner, 2013: 48-53). Finally, it is important to note in this connection that Brazil, while also a large and relatively self-sufficient market, is separated from other Latin American nations not merely by accent, but by language, as well as cultural and historical differences. Certainly there is a program trade between Brazil and the Spanish-speaking world, but Brazilian producers traditionally have had to look more to Europe than to their neighbours in terms of opening up export markets (Sinclair and Straubhaar, 2013).

As in the other major producing nations of Europe and the US, Latin American producers have been increasingly using imported formats to produce national television programs. Latin American viewers routinely see a wide range of international programming which has been remade for them, programming which is familiar and seemingly expressive of their national culture, but the reality behind the screen is that there is a thriving trade in formats and scripts as the more abstract components from which culturally proximate programs can be made for different national markets. This is where “glocalisation” occurs, just as in global fast food and consumer goods marketing: the selective adaptation of global ideas and forms for local, national or regional markets (Sinclair and Wilken, 2009). Over the last decade, Brazil, for example, has adapted a vast swag of reality formats, while in Argentina, leading network *Telefé* produces and airs *Gran hermano*, a local version of the Endemol standard *Big Brother*, and a stream of other productions in a wide range of genres which *Telefé* not only shows domestically but also exports to elsewhere in the region. These include Sony Pictures’ remakes of US series like *The Nanny* (*La niñera* 2004-5) and *Married with Children* (*Casados con hijos* 2005-6). Again, some of the most successful programs of the 2000s from Colombia’s RCN have been remakes of US or UK reality shows, namely *La isla de los famosos* (2004-2007), a version of *Celebrity Survivor*; and *El factor-X* (2006-2012), from *The X-Factor*. In 2010, the most popular program not only on Colombian television, but throughout the Iberoamerican world, was *A corazón abierto* on RCN, a telenovela based on *Grey’s Anatomy* (Aranguren et al., 2011).

For indeed, the characteristic genre of Latin American television remains the telenovela, which not only dominates prime time in domestic markets, but is the most frequently traded within the region, and influential also where it has penetrated certain culturally and linguistically remote territories far beyond. While there is a long history, going back to radionovela days, of scripts being exchanged from one country to another in Latin America, and more recently, of telenovelas being traded in canned form, of more interest in the present context are those instances where a telenovela has been remade sometimes more than

once, or after many years, within the same geolinguistic region, or even within the same market. Some of these have a distinguished place in the popular visual culture of the region. For example, *El derecho de nacer*, began as a radionovela in Cuba in 1948, and was made into a classic film in Mexico in 1951. Given its controversial abortion theme, *El derecho de nacer* has continued to attract audiences in Latin American countries where secular-Catholic conflict is still endemic. Radio Caracas Televisión (RCTV) in Venezuela made it as a telenovela in 1961, and fully two decades later, Televisa of Mexico made a very successful version. After another two decades, in 2001, Televisa made a further version for yet another generation. A Brazilian example is *Gabriela*, a 1975 telenovela based on Jorge Amado's classic novel of 1958. Made by the then still emergent network TV Globo, who also made it their first export to Portugal in 1976, *Gabriela* subsequently became a film in 1983, and then quite recently, in 2012, was remade as a telenovela by TV Globo. This time licensed and distributed by Warner Brothers, the new version has also been seen with great success in Portugal, while rights have been sold to channels in Peru, Paraguay, Nicaragua and the Dominican Republic (TV Globo Internacional, 2013).

Latin American countries have been selling scripts to each other and remaking programs with increasing scale and complexity. For instance, in 1997, Brazil's SBT had a hit with an adaptation of the Argentine children's musical telenovela, *Chiquititas*, which had first run on leading Argentine network Telefé in 1995, and continued until 2001. Mexican network TV Azteca subsequently also remade the show, in 1998. Both adaptations were done in Argentina, so as to use the sets from the original, but with new casts drawn from Brazil and Mexico. A remake of the Brazilian version was done in Portugal in 2007, while more recently, SBT remade it in Brazil. Similarly, SBT made a successful adaptation of *Carrossel*, a 1990s Mexican children's telenovela, in 2012.

However, there is a distinction to be drawn between the kinds of local adaptations of globally-available cultural forms such as Endemol's *Big Brother* on the one hand, and the kind of Mexican-Brazilian-Argentine adaptations just mentioned, which take place on a more lateral, regional axis. We have entered a new stage in which greater interpenetration of markets within the region is facilitating ever more refined and specific tailoring of programs to national audiences, building on the logic of cultural and/or linguistic proximity. This development is particularly significant for national audiences in those Latin American countries that traditionally have had little productive capacity of their own, as is the case with the territories taking-up of *Gabriela* as noted above. On the other hand, it is noteworthy that the regional format trade is opening up

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ever more opportunities for intervention by global corporations like Warner Brothers and Sony Pictures Television.

The intensification of trade within the regional market is not unrelated to the spread of telenovelas out of Latin America and into linguistically and culturally remote territories in Eastern Europe and Asia in the 1980s and 1990s. Clearly this phenomenon needs to be explained on a logic different to the geolinguistic regions and cultural proximity hypotheses which account for the development of the regional market. Rather, there is the mundane but plausible economic explanation in that these were then fairly underdeveloped markets with relatively little production capacity of their own, and telenovelas offered a very affordable option with which to fill expanding schedules. From the point of view of the importing countries, telenovelas were cheap programming in the first place, and came with the bonus of proven success in their home markets – however removed those might have been – and thus, reduced risk. If television is a “cultural industry”, we can think of this development as a kind of import substitution process, as in manufacturing industry: reducing dependency on imports by making local adaptations of them. Interestingly, as these alien markets have matured over the last decade, they have begun to produce their own serial fiction, and audiences have proven responsive to such domestic offerings. The receiving markets are now more sophisticated, at least in that audiences are demanding programs that reflect their own culture and are in their own language, that there is now advertising better able to pay for domestic programming, and that local production capacity is increasing. Accordingly, the market opportunities for the telenovela trade as such have become more finite, and in the same process, the business has become both more competitive and transnationalised. In these circumstances, negotiation over formats, collaborative production, and remakes all flourish, as distinct from the sale of rights to programs imported in cans.

The paradigm case is the series English-speakers know in its US version as *Ugly Betty* (2006-10), but which began as a telenovela, *Yo soy Betty, la fea* (I am Betty, the ugly one), a Colombian production from RCN, first aired over 1999-2001, and subsequently remade for distant foreign markets such as China, India, Russia, Germany, Hungary, Greece and Belgium. But more interestingly in the present context, Mexico and Spain also did their own versions. An unprecedented commercial and popular triumph in Colombia, the original version was shown soon after with great success on Spanish-language network Telemundo in the US, and dubbed and broadcast in several European and Asian countries. Sony made licensed adaptations in India and Russia, while

Fremantle Media parcelled out the rights for the various European versions (Mikos and Perrotta, 2012).

Within the Spanish-speaking world, it was sold as a scripted format to Televisa in Mexico, where it became remade as *La fea más bella*. Successful in the Mexican market, this version in turn was sold to Venezuela, Paraguay, and some Central American countries, and was even sold back to be shown by the original network, RCN in Colombia, in 2006 (O'Boyle and Sutter, 2006). As Televisa had thus come to own both the original as well as its own version, it is worth noting that when Hunan TV's production company, playing by the WTO rules, approached Televisa with a view to making a Chinese version, they chose the Mexican one, as it afforded more opportunities for product placement (Madden, 2008; Ma and Moran, 2013). This would bear out Waisbord's dictum that "Audiences' choices follow industrial dynamics and decisions" (2004: 369).

This sort of "political economy" perspective is one kind of explanation for the export success of telenovelas, consistent with the import substitution argument advanced above. Other explanations have to do with the supposedly universal appeal of the telenovela's generic and narrative characteristics, and with its scheduling. The Spanish case allows us to explore each of these. The original RCN Colombian version was shown on Antena 3 over 2000-2001, and was successful enough in establishing its "brand" to encourage another commercial channel, Telecinco, eventually to develop a Spanish version from Fremantle Media's Grundy Producciones and Grundy Italia for daytime television, first shown in 2006. This was *Yo soy Bea*. Apart from the obvious adaptations in common with other imported material in Spain – the use of Castilian Spanish and a localised "televisual sense of place" (Carini, 2013: 119) – *Bea* otherwise broke the mould in seeking to establish a more "realistic" mode, and toning down the "excessive farce of the original" (Ibid.: 118).

This strain towards "realism", remarked upon by more than one commentator (see also Smith, 2013: 229), is noteworthy in light of the view commonly held elsewhere, that the original *Yo soy Betty*, and several of its derivative versions, including the US one, are set apart from the common run of telenovelas precisely because of their zany humour and a certain self-parodying of the genre itself. The original scriptwriter, Fernando Gaitán, has said that *Yo soy Betty* has elements "very similar to a US situation comedy", including its comic characters and moments: it incorporates the traditional melodrama with the innovation of humour (Rivero, 2013: 53-54). Or as one producer simply put it, "It's a telenovela with comedy, that's why it works" (de la Fuente, 2006). However, the exaggerated characteristics evidently were deemed at odds with the "TV syntax" to which Spanish national audiences were accustomed, emboldening

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critic Paul Julian Smith to propose the generalisation that “European drama continues to be specifically tailored to domestic audiences and is distinct from both Latin American and North American forms” (Smith, 2013: 225).

Certainly Spain has shown itself to be a market resistant to the telenovela’s apparent appeal elsewhere. While there was a popular fad for telenovela imports there in the 1970s, critics sneered at them for their populist quality, and dubbed them *culebrones*, because of their unaccustomed length. In fact, telenovela *aficionados* like to distinguish them from soap operas as a genre, arguing that unlike soap operas, telenovelas have a beginning, middle and end, and are of finite length, usually somewhere between 75 and 150 episodes. Furthermore, one of the distinctive although underestimated features of the telenovela as a genre is its scheduling: they are “strip-programmed”, aired five or six nights a week in the same timeslot, usually over three to six months (Miller, 2010: 200). As Pertierra notes in the Mexican case, clearcut genre and timeslot divisions provide a degree of stability and predictability for programmers and audiences alike, no longer found in many other broadcast environments (Pertierra and Turner, 2013: 56).

In Spain, *Yo soy Bea* was strip-programmed in the usual way for telenovelas, but in the daytime, at least at for its initial run. According to one account, the Spanish remake vastly increased both the length and the number of episodes, so the narrative became much more complex, and leaned towards the infinitude of a soap opera. It was shifted to a 7.00 p.m. time slot as ratings slacked off, ultimately ending there, wrung dry after three years (2006-2009) and 773 episodes (Carini, 2013: 119-121). Another account says it was also carrying a heavy freight of product placement which added to the ultimate exhaustion (Smith, 2013: 229-232). However, it did achieve remarkable success at its height, the only daytime telenovela, and the only program made from a foreign format, to be amongst the highest rating ten programs of 2006. It is important to appreciate that in Spain, there are two prime times: in addition to the conventional evening prime time, after 8.00 p.m., there is the *sobremesa*, the traditional siesta hours after the main meal of the day, from about 2.00 until 5.00 p.m. As in the case of *Bea*, programs scheduled in the *sobremesa* can attract higher ratings than in evening prime time, especially in summer. Smith explains, “Habits of consumption and family routines are implied by format and timeslot, as are spaces of circulation, such as the home, neighbourhood and workplace” (2013: 224).

Clearly, the *sobremesa* in Spain forms a “zone of consumption” (Pertierra and Turner, 2013). Yet while telenovelas are also scheduled on daytime television in Latin American countries, and the siesta custom remains widely observed, there is no *sobremesa* as such. The Brazilian experience provides

a contrasting case to that of Spain, while still underscoring the point that scheduling, and especially daypart, matters. The TVRecord network, second only in Brazil to the dominant Globo, produced another variation, *Bela, a feia*, from Televisa's *La fea más bella* format. However, unlike everywhere else, it debuted with disappointing results, but following some research, it was then moved to a later timeslot, and from there went on to dominate the ratings (Lippert, 2013: 93).

The complex career of the *Betty* format further illustrates the point made earlier, that the format trade is not just taking place on the basis of producers dealing one nation to another, but has opened up a space for global players like Sony Pictures Television, Warner Brothers, and as noted in the case of *Betty* in Europe, Fremantle Media. While there are some well-established links from one national network to another, such as Televisa of Mexico's program supply deal with leading Spanish-language network Univisión, the current trend is towards global companies working in partnership with successful national producers, so as to capitalise on those productions which can be formatted across national cultural and linguistic barriers. The truly global character of such arrangements in the future may be well-exemplified by a 2012 deal between Sony Pictures Television and Televisa, under which Sony has a first option on all Televisa's formats outside of Televisa's home territories of Latin America and the US. Conversely, Televisa has "first-look" rights at Sony's formats for possible production in Spain, where it has an interest in a production company (Hecht, 2012).

The global *Betty* phenomenon has given Colombia a rapid rise in the hierarchy of Latin American television production, not just because of RCN, but also its rival RTI (formerly Caracol). A major step came in 2009, when it was announced that Telemundo, the second largest Spanish-language network in the US, had acquired a 40 per cent interest in RTI. Telemundo is owned by NBC Universal, whose ultimate parent company is General Electric. RTI had already been producing programs for and with Telemundo, and had actually sold their studio in Miami to their US partner, but the deal strengthens Telemundo's security of supply in the US, as well as enhancing its opportunity to sell the rights to the programming into other markets. For RTI, it ensures an outlet for their product in the US, the world's largest export market for Spanish-language programming (Alsema, 2009). In addition, now that Telemundo, Sony and others are co-producing telenovelas in Colombia, the country is emerging as a key producer for the Latin American and US Hispanic cultural-linguistic market, and Bogotá joins Miami as a "transterritorial" node in the region (Mato, 2005: 425), a new "cultural capital" (Curtin, 2007).

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These lofty manoeuvres are motivated by the fact that at the grassroots level, audiences want to see television which engages them in and with their own local vernacular, whether at the level of their national culture, or, as in the case of US Hispanics, differentiated at sub-national, minority level. Increasingly, formatted programs are able to do this, while at the same time, enabling both national and international producers to take advantage of the economies and risk reduction which the “strategic regionalisation” of programming brings to them (Sinclair and Wilken, 2009). The apparent capacity of the format trade to thus manage the homogenisation versus heterogenisation paradox, more than with conventional co-productions or other forms of off-shore production and international collaboration, put it now at the heart of the current transnationalisation of television programming. **M**

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