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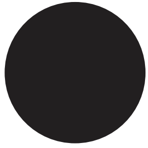

Keeping it Real

Watching the World Watch TV

Eric Hoyt

Ewa Mularczyk remembers the electrifying first season of "Big Brother"—the show that entombs ten strangers for three months in a house wired with hidden cameras and microphones—in Poland. When a housemate on Polish "Big Brother" was broadcast bathing nude, the nation reacted with horror and fascination. "It was the first time we ever saw anything on TV like that," Mularczyk says. At that moment she became, like millions of other viewers watching their own country's versions of the show across the world, a "Big Brother" addict. When it first premiered in the Netherlands, in 1999, the show generated many viewers and much controversy. Within three years its production company, Endemol, had licensed or produced the format in 42 countries. But Mularczyk went further than most "Big Brother" fans. She became a reality television producer, moving from Poland to Los Angeles in 2001. To date, she has worked on "Hell's Kitchen," "Dr. 90210" and "I Survived a Japanese Game Show."

Cultural critics and highbrow couch surfers routinely deride reality (or unscripted) television. Reality TV is, the argument goes, shallow trash—a guilty pleasure at best. While shows like "Mad Men" or "The Wire" are lauded for their depth, they reinforce the notion that reality TV should be viewed shallowly, or not at all. When it comes to the club of artistic, canonical works, reality television doesn't make it past the erudite bouncers at the door. But recall an older definition of the canon, before it was a collection of essential works. A canon was a set of ecclesiastical laws, or a secular set of codes and rules. Appropriately, the most important document that is exchanged between a reality TV-show's creator and its adapter is frequently referred to as the "Format Bible." The Bible

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lays out the program's structure, essential elements and production timeline. The Bible's writers try to anticipate and answer every question that a producer adapting a format could imagine. Think of a format, then, as an emerging Global Canon, one in which the meaning is generated through multiple levels of exchange and adaptation.

It is unfair and shortsighted to write off reality television as a vast cultural wasteland, particularly when taking this canonical view. What if we went further, and explored reality shows not simply in terms of what we saw on our own TV set, but compared that to what viewers in other countries saw on their screens, and examined what moves them? And what if we looked past the screen itself, into the business and production models behind these shows? What we find is a window into the complexities and contradictions of globalization. Mularczyk's story is only the tip of the iceberg.

Juggernaut

The format trade is a multi-billion dollar global business. The Format Recognition and Protection Association [FRAPA] estimates television shows like "Big Brother" generated some $12.3 billion in worldwide revenue from 2006 through 2008—a lucrative industry by any standard. In some ways, buying and selling television formats follows larger patterns in global production processes, such as the drive to reduce costs through hiring non-union labor and the rise of multinational corporations like News Corp. and Telefónica, the telecom giant that owned Endemol from 2000 to 2007. Yet, on both economic and cultural levels, the television format market has also resisted some of globalization's key features. Rather than leading to a homogenization of culture, formatted shows are adapted to suit local tastes. The Australian "Big Brother," for instance, gets a Jacuzzi, a *barbie*-que and a more laid back tone to make it more Aussie. Unscripted formatted shows, then, react to global cultural and social realities while acting locally.

It would be a mistake, however, to praise reality television as some sort of global utopia. Though the flow of television formats is more multidirectional than cinema, where Hollywood still dominates, the titans of the trade are all based in Western Europe. The Dutch company Endemol ("Big Brother," "Deal or No Deal," "Wipeout") and the UK-based Fremantle Media ("Family Feud," "Pop Idol," "[Insert Nation's Name Here]'s Got Talent") have expanded into global media conglomerates with offices and production facilities across the continents. In the shows themselves, racial and gender stereotypes are often exploited as much as they are challenged. In 2007, British Channel 4's "Celebrity Big Brother" created public uproars in Britain and India when multiple housemates hurled racist insults at Indian actress Shilpa Shetty. Ultimately, taking stock of the global trade in television formats is about seeing the ways that a media (or medium) can reveal certain truths about culture and exchange.

Big Brother's Special Sauce

Formats are recipes. Jon Kroll, who executive produced "Big Brother" and "Amazing Race" in the United States, calls a format "a series of repeatable elements that were integral to a show's success in one territory and that can be exported and developed into another territory." These "repeatable elements" can range widely, encompassing everything from the show's concept and rules to its characters and stories, as well as its visual design. Genres of formatted shows vary widely. Formats can be a scripted series, like the British comedy "The Office" or Colombian telenovela "Yo soy Betty, la Fea" (I am Betty, the

Ugly), which were adapted and remade for American television. Formats can also be unscripted. Game shows like “Wheel of Fortune” were some of the earliest formats to be traded and emulated worldwide. Today, unscripted “reality television” dominates the global format trade in no small part because the genre is so amorphous, combining elements of the game show, the soap opera, the talk show and the documentary. Above all, reality TV tends to be cheap to make and easy to market.

Formats exist to mitigate risk and make money. In an uncertain marketplace, they add a degree of predictability. If a format was a hit in Holland, it might be a hit in Germany, Turkey, New Zealand, or anywhere. By licensing a format, Kroll says that producers gain a sales tool to pitch networks. They can show what a completed program from its country of origin looks like and how the series performed where it first aired. Producers and networks sometimes license formats even when there is no legal obligation to do so. Television formats are not copyrightable, since copyright does not protect ideas, only the expression of ideas.

Although formats include behind-the-scenes expertise that goes beyond the shell of the show, most courts around the world have ruled against plaintiffs in copyright cases regarding unscripted formats. Still, since litigation is costly and reputations are at stake, many networks license formats even with no legal imperative. And some formats are stricter than others. U.K.-based Celador Productions, for instance, requires licensees of “Who Wants to be a Millionaire?” to follow the format very closely. The questions change depending on culture, but the lighting, music, stage design and lifelines (ask the audience, 50-50, phone a friend) remain the same. You can watch it in a foreign hotel room or at the multiplex in “Slumdog Millionaire” (also co-produced by Celador). The language may not be recognizable, but the televisual style is the same.

It is unfair and shortsighted to write off reality television as a vast cultural wasteland.

More often, licensees of TV formats require some latitude in adaptation. The early licensees of “Big Brother” closely adhered to Endemol’s original. For the most part, the strategy worked. “Big Brother” turned into a sensational hit during its first seasons in Belgium, Britain, Germany, Italy, Poland and dozens of other nations. The original format appeared to be a universal blockbuster—until it reached the United States. When the first season of the American “Big Brother” generated mediocre ratings, Endemol and CBS realized it needed to be revamped for American sensibilities. Kroll was part of the second season production team that reshaped the show. “The idea was to make it much more summer fun, more like ‘Melrose Place’,” he says. CBS and the American production team also sought to “make the show more of a power struggle,” Kroll says, by changing the way housemates were evicted. While the original format had viewers vote on who they wanted evicted, the American team created a position called Head of Household, which one contestant wins each week. The Head of Household receives immunity from eviction for the week, gets to nominate two housemates to get kicked out, and spends the week sleeping in the house’s most luxurious suite—sometimes snuggled up alongside a “showmance” (an on-show romance) companion. CBS went even further, scaling “Big Brother” back from five episodes per week to three, giving

the producers more time to edit the enormous pool of footage into dramatic, engaging story arcs. The American overhaul paid off and ratings went up. Now in its 12th season, "Big Brother" routinely wins the summer ratings for CBS.

When the Middle East Broadcasting Center [MBC] licensed "Big Brother," both parties knew the format would require substantial adaptation to succeed among the 150 million Arabic speakers and many nations that MBC's satellite reaches. In his outstanding new book "Reality Television and Arab Politics," Marwan M. Kraidy analyzes the controversial pan-Arab "Big Brother"—retitled "al-Ra'is" (The Boss). Although MBC is Saudi-owned, the satellite network chose to shoot "The Boss" on a resort island belonging to its more socially permissive neighbor, Bahrain. MBC executives also decided to satellite broadcast the show on MBC 2, a slightly edgier satellite station than the family-oriented MBC 1. The network completely redesigned the "Big Brother" house to try to make it palatable to conservative Islamic audiences. The house in Bahrain featured gender-segregated sleeping areas, bathrooms, and prayer rooms. Men and women intermingled only in a shared living room. "We destroyed the format," one MBC executive told Kraidy. "No touching, no kissing, no sex… two separate prayer rooms!"

Yet these makeovers proved insufficient. When "The Boss" debuted six years ago, the show aired for little more than a week. MBC abruptly pulled the plug amid public protests from groups who decried the show as "a threat to Islam." As Kraidy points out, however, the show also had its defenders. "Many members of the Bahraini parliament rose in defense of the program," writes Kraidy. These officials "argued that the program would boost tourism, promote foreign investment, and create new jobs, therefore contributing to national growth." Kraidy demonstrates how these defenses, couched in economic rather than moralistic terms, are endemic pieces of the political landscapes of Bahrain and the surrounding Arab states. Yet the relationship between on-screen cultural representations and off-screen economic consequences is a crucial dynamic in reality television throughout the world.

Some territories remain out of reach no matter how much the format attempts to adapt. "Big Brother" has traveled to 42 countries, but it has never cracked one of the world's most lucrative TV markets—Japan. Some Japanese producers believe that the back-stabbing, win-at-all-costs spirit of "Big Brother" deviates too far from the nation's collectivist culture. Other producers think that Japan has such a rich history in unscripted television—the nation created talent competitions and outrageous game shows decades before they reached primetime in the West—that any foreign format inevitably feels old hat.

Formats themselves can change. In 2001, Endemol introduced a new twist to Dutch "Big Brother." The house split into two areas: rich and poor. Periodic competitions determined which group lived where. Several other nations quickly adopted the rich house/poor house innovation, but Argentina did not. As media scholars Silvio Waisbord and Sonia Jalfin observe, "this was not considered funny, fictional or exotic but rather offensive in the Argentine context" of massive poverty following the nation's 1999 financial collapse. Additionally, "foreign versions of 'Big Brother' featured a scene at the beginning of the season in which participants were kidnapped by a gang of hooded people who proceeded to rip their clothes before dropping them off in a house where the show took place." Local producers immediately rejected this piece of the format. "Given the history of dictatorships in our country," said one local producer, "you cannot do that."

Endemol has flown out more than 5,000 contestants to face challenges like the Sweeper and the Sucker Punch on its Buenos Aires set.

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Falling—a universal entertainment.

The Global Obstacle Course

In 2001, Endemol established a production hub in Buenos Aires to film the show "Fear Factor" for several different territories. Building one central studio for "Fear Factor" saved Endemol and its partners the cost of building elaborate sets in Egypt, Germany, Turkey and the other nations where the show would travel. Buenos Aires presented an ideal locale due to the city's temperate climate, experienced production crews and devalued currency. Although the Argentine peso has stabilized since the early-2000s and the cost savings to Endemol have shrunk, the company has only expanded its Buenos Aires operations. Endemol recently built production hubs in Argentina for its new formats "101 Ways to Leave a Game Show," a quiz show where losers are blasted out of cannons and sent careening into swimming pools, and "XXS" (Extra Extra Small), where contestants scrub the floors and perform other everyday chores in a house built for a giant.

The company's most widely used production hub, though, is the sprawling set of obstacle courses for "Wipeout." According to *The Times of London,* Endemol has flown out more than 5,000 contestants since 2008 to face challenges like the Sweeper and Sucker Punch on its Buenos Aires set. Despite the transportation and lodging costs, Endemol can produce episodes of "Wipeout" for just 30 percent of what it would cost to build sets and film locally in the 23 nations where "Wipeout" airs. (The United States is the only nation that doesn't film "Wipeout" in Argentina—the U.S. domestic market can sustain its set in Southern California.)

By having a single set and cycling hundreds of contestants from dozens of different nations through it, Endemol

would seem to have put an end to format localization. If the "Big Brother" houses in different countries demonstrate how production design can express culture (shrimp on the barbie for Aussies, gender-segregated sleeping quarters for Saudis), then how could a single set express anything remotely cultural?

"Wipeout" is a race around an elaborate series of courses, which contestants must successfully navigate despite the ever-increasing amount of absurd obstacles. The likelihood of a dramatic spill is ever-present. Surely, each nation's format would look similar when the show's contestants all move through this Buenos Aires compound like widgets through a factory. "Wipeout" may present a more wholesome and family friendly façade than the shamelessly voyeuristic "Big Brother," but the show suffers from its own innocuous repetitiveness. Since every week of the American "Wipeout" is nearly indistinguishable from the last, how different could these foreign versions be?

Not very—at least, not the American, British and Australian versions. All three follow the same basic set-up, where 20 or so men and women compete and are gradually eliminated until the surviving finalists enter the Wipeout Zone. In this final stage, the contestants race through foamy pits and giant swinging hammers toward the cash prize ($50,000; £10,000; A$20,000). The show emphasizes humor over competition, adding cartoonish sound effects and slow motion replays to punctuate the spills. Often, the hosts (all male) turn it over to their "reporter" (always a young, attractive female) who interviews contestants in the field. This goes on for an hour. The next episode subjects a new group of 20 people to the same obstacles, falls and laughs.

The uniformity across the Anglo-"Wipeouts" is striking. The American, British, and Australian contestants complete the same obstacles; their falls, flips and spills are replayed in slow motion in precisely the same way. All the men beat their chests and yell before beginning the qualification round. Only the accents differ. British host Richard Hammond heckles the contestants with a bit more venom than his duller American counterparts, but even the commentators' banter is all but indistinguishable. As Endemol USA President David Goldberg told *The New York Times* in 2008, "The whole idea of watching people crash and burn—but not get hurt—is something that people seem to be drawn to." Perhaps Goldberg is right. Maybe there is something universally entertaining about men hitting themselves in the groin while attempting to jump atop a giant banana. And maybe that transcends all cultural and national boundaries. (Incidentally, the Tokyo Broadcasting System believes that Endemol's "Wipeout" format illegally ripped off its obstacle course programs "MXC," "Sasuke," and "Kunoichi." The lawsuit is ongoing.)

Sometimes, what we see on the screen in the various "Wipeouts" is essentially the same, but sometimes it's different, and those differences are telling. Spain's "¡Guaypaut!" carries a sexual charge absent from the Anglo versions of "Wipeout." For starters, the show's producers collapsed the commentator and reporter roles into one bombshell host, Carmen Alcayde. When Alcayde interviews contestants before entering the course, the show turns into a T&A parade. At one point, a buxom contestant dances so hard her bikini top falls off. The network's censor blur flashes, but little is left to the imagination.

On the Arabic satellite channel MBC 1—the flagship MBC channel whose sister station MBC 2 killed the "Big Brother" spinoff, "The Boss"—Middle Eastern audiences can watch a woman wearing a hijab headscarf topple over the identical obstacles, the exact same course, in fact, as Miss

Bikini. One contestant wore a tracksuit under her hijab to cover her skin, leaving only her face and hands exposed, yet no amount of garments could protect her from the blow of the Sucker Punch, a wall armed with boxing gloves that randomly spring out and strike, like whack-a-moles with a vengeance. Probably two-thirds of the female contestants—particularly the younger women—opt to wear tank tops, shorts and elastic hair bands instead of the traditional garb. But the show presents all the male and female contestants more or less the same as they move through the course. Endemol's earlier programs "Big Brother" and "Star Academy"—a sort of "Big Brother"-"Pop Idol" hybrid where hopeful male and female stars live, train, and compete in the same house—both contained *ikhtilat*, the mixing of genders, that made the formats inflammatory to moral conservatives when they were imported into the Middle East.

"Star Academy," which satellite broadcasts from the more socially liberal LBC (Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation), has achieved enormous popularity among young Arabic speaking audiences during its seven season run, even as some Saudi clerics denounce it as "Satan Academy." With "Wipeout," Endemol created a format that could be easily appropriated for family-friendly MBC 1. Every episode is a one-off. There are no erotic tensions to continue among contestants from week to week, nor do such tensions ever have the chance to spark in a show where contestants primarily interact with genderless moving padded objects. Yet tameness can have its price. The first season of "Wipeout" on MBC 1 generated little of the audience enthusiasm surrounding LBC's "Star Academy." It is unclear when or if the next batch of pan-Arab contestants will fly out to Buenos Aires to face the Sucker Punch.

Playing for Keeps

The most imaginative adaptations of "Wipeout" have come from the former Soviet bloc. The producers of "Cruel Intentions," a co-production of Endemol Argentina and Red Square for Russia's Channel One, built Aztec-themed façades around all the familiar obstacles. The competitors on this Indiana Jones-like set are attractive Russian celebrities dressed in matching wetsuits. The focus on celebrities rather than laypeople speaks to the producers' assumptions about who audiences want to see onscreen.

Sometimes, what we see on the screen in the various "Wipeouts" is the same, but sometimes it's different, and those differences are telling.

The Anglo versions of "Wipeout" encourage viewer identification with ordinary contestants. The classic game show question—"What will you use the money for if you win?"—invites the viewer to root for ordinary participants in the show. In other cultures, the idea of watching ordinary people compete on TV is boring. That everyday folk would publicly humiliate themselves in pursuit of money seems all the more pathetic. Following the assumption that Russian audiences would rather watch celebrities, and prefer a display of physical prowess to goofy humiliation, the producers of "Cruel Intentions" reimagined the "Wipeout" format to emphasize these qualities. Nevertheless, even here, contestants wipe out in the end—no one, not even the Russians, can escape the wrath of the Big Balls, the giant red orbs that contestants must pinball between.

The most thorough and creative reimagining comes from the Ukraine. In January and February 2010, the Buenos Aires obstacle courses played host to "The Battle of Ukrainian Cities" [BUM]. Instead of featuring a new batch of 20 contestants each episode, BUM developed a series of tournament-style match-ups between teams representing Ukraine's 26 provinces and municipalities. Each five-person team consisted of two men, two women and a celebrity team captain—pop star Ruslana and boxing champions Vyacheslav Uzelkov and Dmitrij Nikulin, for instance.

BUM debuted a far more competitive and serious take to the obstacle course than other versions of "Wipeout." Humor and competition coexist in the Anglo, Spanish and Arabic versions of "Wipeout," but the laughter and falls are emphasized over athletic competition. BUM reverses these priorities. The teams are there to represent their hometowns, not look like goofballs. Any moments of humor occur only to ease the tension.

BUM employs visual and sound aesthetics that further emphasize the competition and suspense. Consider the way the show appropriates the Sweeper—a rotating arm that contestants on lily pad platforms must leap over, lest they be knocked into the water. Like all of the brightly colored, foam-padded props in "Wipeout," the Sweeper generally takes on a cartoonish quality, accentuated by Boing! Pow! sound effects added for the show in postproduction. But not here. Instead, the slow-mo Sweeper replays feel like something out of a war movie. Instead of cuing cartoonish sounds, the replays use the effect of a helicopter blade revolving in slow-motion, like the beginning of "Apocalypse Now."

The show's title also emphasizes a national consciousness that's a part of the shared Ukranian experiance. It's the battle of *Ukrainian* cities, not Lithuanian or Georgian cities. In the majority of "Wipeout" adaptations, we feel a bond to our nation's version of the show not because of any hard sell about the virtues of America, Spain, or Australia, but because the contestants look and talk like us. The commentators crack cheesy jokes laced with our culture's pop references, and we get it. But BUM diverges. The national and regional bonds are not invisible here, but explicit. BUM encourages viewers to identify with their representative athletes and encourages the competitors to approach their missions with a seriousness of purpose missing from other "Wipeouts," where only a cash prize is at stake. In the time leading up to the competition, boxer Vyacheslav Uzelkov, captain for the small-to-mid-sized province of the Vinnytsia, put his team on an intense training regimen. "We run cross-country races regularly, jump, lift weights and improve reaction-response time and so on," Uzelkov told the website BoxNews.com.ua. "There are no professional athletes on our team; however, physically everyone is well-trained." The preparation paid off—Vinnytsia dominated all the way to the finals.

Ukraine competes not simply among its own cities, but against the world. On its website, the Ukrainian television network Inter boasts about the nation's superior performance in the "Wipeout" format: "In this program world record in the qualification round is broken. One Ukrainian competitor shows the best time in the history of 'Wipeout'... One more player demonstrates a new way of passing the Big Donuts. Never before have people run by the rubber rings. And our fellow-townsman does that easily."

And yet, despite the regional pride natives of Vinnytsia may feel about their team, and despite Ukraine's innovation in dunking the Big Donuts, the obstacle course, production crews, even the Big Donuts are in Buenos Aires.

Stay Tuned

For years, unscripted TV has represented the low-cost alternative to heavily unionized, scripted productions. Local producers could create their own format adaptations because they were, by and large, inexpensive and would attract audiences who were turned off by foreign subtitles or accents. But now, the recession has intensified pressures to cut costs even further in an industry already known for its bargain basement budgets. The sweeper arm of globalization and outsourcing is approaching unscripted television fast. Adaptive local cultures can jump over it, but jobs and domestic infrastructures will get knocked into the pool. As Ewa Mularczyk put it, "Of course I would like to have 'Wipeout' shot in Poland, and have Polish engineers build the obstacles and highlight the Polish countryside. But ultimately, you see, it's all about money."

Mularczyk is right. Financial imperatives will accelerate the production hub model of television formatting and production. Ultimately, though, the global significance of reality TV cannot be reduced to economics, politics, or any other single determinant. Mularczyk was drawn to "Big Brother" for emotional reasons, switched career tracks, moved to the United States. Sure, there were economic factors involved (the same opportunities didn't exist for her in Poland), but initially, it was an emotional response to this globally formatted show that made her change her life.

For producers, television formats are recipes. But for audiences, formats can become full of meaning that producers can't control or anticipate. Reality television helps us see that the Global Canon is not a collection of high art that emerges from singular creators, conveying universal meanings. Instead, the Global Canon is the threads of shared culture, produced and reproduced continually, reflecting common emotions and economic realities while allowing a diversity of representations. Like the "Big Brother" house or "Wipeout" course, the structures are vacant until ambitious contestants and curious viewers arrive. The "Big Brother" format inspired public protests in Bahrain, media debates in numerous other countries and at least one transnational career change. Endemol's provocative formats broke down barriers between public and private space, but only through our participation have they so thoroughly touched both.●