

Jean K. Chalaby, **The Format Age: Television's Entertainment Revolution**, Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2016, 216 pp., \$69.79 (hardcover), \$24.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by
Dom Caristi
Ball State University, USA

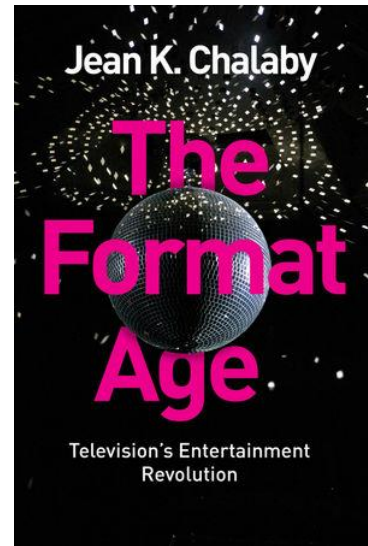
The fact that people in almost any country can see a local version of the television shows *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*, *Big Brother*, or *Survivor* is not just a coincidence. Although a few television programs have been adapted for local audiences worldwide since the earliest days of television, the real boom in the international sale of television formats coincides with the new millennium. It stands to reason that the incidence of format sales has increased so dramatically in recent years. Lule (2012) asserts that globalization could not occur without modern media and that globalization and media have always been in a symbiotic relationship. The expansion of formats worldwide is connected to the current state of media economics, international exchange of goods and services, and digitization of video. In ***The Format Age: Television's***

Entertainment Revolution, Jean K. Chalaby (City University, London) provides extensive background on the development of TV format sales to global markets. The author has an extensive research background in international television, having written three earlier books (*The Invention of Journalism*, *Transnational Television Worldwide*, and *Transnational Television in Europe*) and dozens of articles on the topic.

The book will certainly appeal to scholars in broadcast programming, television history, or international trade, but it is readable enough for nonresearchers who just have an interest in television. It is well researched and the text provides many tables to help contextualize information for the reader.

"Formats" refers to the structure of programs rather than the actual recorded programs themselves. For example, *Strictly Come Dancing* is a dance competition program produced in the UK for a UK audience. Recordings of the program could be sold to foreign markets, but instead the producers license the format to producers in other countries, who are given a structure that can be adapted as necessary. The original show creators are compensated, and the purchasers receive a framework that has already proved successful. Format purchasers get a sort of "cookbook" that they can follow, complete with music, rules, sets, lighting, costumes, and even advice for the selection of local talent to insert in the program. Program creators can serve as consultants during both the preproduction and production stages. In 2014, Slovenia became the 50th country to license *Strictly Come Dancing*. According to Esser (2010), an average of 33% of U.S. television networks' prime-time hours can be attributed to formatted programs.

One might wonder why producers in other countries don't simply "steal" an idea for implementation in their own country, and there have been a couple of examples of unscrupulous



producers doing just that. That phenomenon exists domestically as well as internationally, as any successful television program is likely to be copied. In *The Format Age*, Chalaby explains the five legal routes available to producers who believe that their formats have been unfairly copied. As with most legal issues, the threat of action is usually enough to prevent illegal infringement. More than the fear of legal action, producers often prefer to license rather than steal formats because of the added security of having a partner with a proven track record involved in the endeavor.

Chalaby identifies four "super formats": 21st-century programs that vastly impacted the format sales industry. Despite the role the United States has taken in format sales, all four programs came from Europe: Three originated in the UK (*Who Wants to be a Millionaire*, *Survivor*, and *Idol*) and the fourth in Holland (*Big Brother*). The programs are noteworthy not only for their commercial success but also for the innovations they brought to the formats.

While the majority of program formats sold worldwide are game shows or reality television programs, some rather successful fiction programs have been licensed as well. The BBC series *Till Death Us Do Part* was licensed to CBS in the United States and became the iconic 1970s sitcom *All in the Family*. Selling fiction formats has the added benefit that entire scripts can be provided, but it would be naïve to believe the purchaser can simply translate them for a local audience and expect success. Waisbord and Jalfin (2009) note that the sale of the programs *The Nanny* and *Married with Children* in Argentina required that jokes about promiscuity and sexuality be changed for cultural suitability. More recently, the Columbian-created *Yo Soy Betty, La Fea* was successfully sold in the United States (as *Ugly Betty*), Germany, Russia, and Spain, in large part because producers in those countries were able to adapt the format to local sensibilities (Mikos & Perrotta, 2012). Barbara Selznick (2008) explains that comedy and reality programs (including game shows) are better suited to formatting than dramatic shows would be.

What Chalaby does *not* do with this book is engage in discussions about the cultural implications of exporting formats, whether countries (primarily the UK and the United States) engage in cultural imperialism by selling formats, or whether audiences are somehow affected. Other authors offer such reflections. Selznick's (2008) examination of co-production of television provides insights into the social issues. Disparaging terms such as "McTelevision" and "Euroschock" refer to the sort of standardized television programs likely to be produced by production companies from different countries collaborating to make something suitable for people in multiple countries. One interesting analysis examines the use of expatriates in Russian and Ukraine reality programs and their impact on transnationalism (Sadowski-Smith, 2014). *The Format Age* has less emphasis on the critique and more on an examination of the historical and economic underpinnings of the phenomenon.

Alternatives

Multiple books devote a chapter or section to television formats, but there are only a few others that devote the entire text to the topic. Two worth noting are collections of essays written by various scholars: *TV Formats Worldwide*, edited by Albert Moran (2009), *Global Television Formats*, edited by Tasha Oren and Sharon Shahaf (2012). As with any collection, the chapters are of varying quality and there is some repetition among chapters. Because the chapters are organized according to each

contributor's expertise, one book might be better suited than the other for some readers based on their interests. For example, the Oren and Shahaf book dedicates four chapters to the *Idol* franchise, including a chapter each on the African and New Zealand versions. The Moran text includes a chapter on news parodies. For scholars who want all the available information on international television format sales, it makes sense to have on hand both of these books along with *The Format Age*. For example, if one were researching the worldwide spread of telenovelas, Joseph Straubhaar provides a chapter on Brazilian telenovelas in the Oren and Shahaf book; Milly Buonanno discusses Italian telenovelas in the Moran text, while Chalaby provides a general overview. All three books would provide a more comprehensive understanding than any single title. Anyone seeking only a basic understanding, however, would find that any one of the books is suitable. For those most interested in quantitative data, Chalaby's book is probably the best choice, as he provides a good deal of tabular data not available in the others.

Conclusion

Jean K. Chalaby knows a lot about the business of international television format sales. This book provides an excellent overview for those who want a single book to provide them with the history and highlights of this phenomenon.

References

- Esser, A. (2010). Television formats: Primetime staple, global markets. *Popular Communication*, 8, 273–292.
- Lule, J. (2012). *Globalization and media: Global village of babel*. Plymouth, UK: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Mikos, L., & Perrotta, M. (2012). Traveling style: Aesthetic differences and similarities in national adaptations of *Yo soy Betty, la fea*. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 15, 81–97.
- Moran, A. (Ed.). (2009). *TV formats worldwide*. Bristol, UK: Intellect.
- Oren, T., & Shahaf, S. (Eds.). (2012). *Global television formats: Understanding television across borders*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Sadowski-Smith, C. (2014). Global migration meets TV format adaptation: The post-Soviet diaspora, "whiteness," and return migration in *Dancing with the Stars* (U.S.) and Ukraine's *The Bachelor*. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 17, 753–768.

Selznick, B. (2008). *Global television: Co-producing culture*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

Waisbord, S., & Jafin, S. (2009). Imagining the national: Gatekeepers and the adaptation of global franchises in Argentina. In A. Moran (Ed.), *TV formats worldwide* (pp. 55–74). Bristol, UK: Intellect.