

## Examining Trans-media/-national Networks

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Format reality television should be understood as a transnational network. Format television may also be better known as branded formats. They are shows in which the basic format is sold and the show is then tailored to a specific area or country. These programs form the backbone of broadcasting schedules worldwide. The rise of formats and the increasing access to multiple versions requires a new conceptualization of what exactly a “program” is. Many viewers know of or consume multiple variations of the same show. Christine Quail’s (2015) article on reality television in Canada is fundamental to my understanding. She argues that this requires a new way of considering the programming and viewing experience. Programs are now inherently transnational and consist of multiple shows. Her work speaks directly to this need for a reconceptualization of programming and formats while also bringing to the fore the numerous ways these linkages occur. This trans-nationality occurs in the shows themselves and through reception and distribution.

Viewers and participants must be considered from this viewpoint. I myself am an avid viewer of reality shows. I have watched at least 6 versions of *Top Model*, 4 *Amazing Races*, and spent a Christmas with my extended family watching *World Idol*, among others. These versions do not separate themselves in my brain but influence each future viewing experience. Challenges and performances are compared to their national and international counterparts. Expectations are also influenced by viewing habits. Experiences with previous seasons or other versions of a program impact what a viewer knows about and expects from any future offering. This experience is not limited to viewers. In my interviews with Canadian participants, it came out that many of them decided to apply after seeing versions of the show from other countries. One even decided to apply because of a giant crush he had on an American contestant. The majority had at least some understanding of the program they were applying to based on having seen other versions or seasons. These individuals have been conditioned by the format and in turn bring that understanding to their own time on the show. Canadian versions of programs, at least, are in this way influenced, perhaps unconsciously, by the participants. Format television then is both influenced by what has come before and will influence future seasons and versions.

These programs should not be considered as disparate entities but as interconnected. The programs and distributors must also be considered. Many shows explicitly promote this interconnectivity by having guest appearances/cameos from participants from other versions. Other times shows make specific mention of how they are modifying the program. The second

season of *Canadian Idol* for example noted that while *Idol* existed (at that time) in 32 countries around the world, they was the first to allow contestants to play their own instruments. The show specifically presented themselves as being the first rather than the only. While potentially a minor linguistic choice, it is illuminating to the flexibility of the format. This announcement was self-congratulatory while also nodding to the likely adoption of this practice by others. These changes are both celebrated for their uniqueness and often quickly incorporated into following versions. Networks can also rely on various versions of formats to promote or maintain interest. Canadian networks often use international (usually American) versions of a show to boost viewership of national versions. National versions are frequently scheduled to start the week after an international version ends. Networks are counting on audience members' enjoyment of the format as being more important to viewing habits than an affiliation to a particular version. As Quail (2015) points out, format reality television calls into question what a "program" now is. Considering it as a transnational network is an important starting point for this reconceptualization.