

## **Questions of Scale, Structure, and Agency in Media Industries Research**

“Jumping Scales: Global, Local and Hyper-Local(s) Levels of Production and Cultural Adaptation of Transnational Television Formats”

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Studies on globally circulated television formats – one of the fastest growing sectors in the transnational television industry - have increasingly highlighted the varied, culturally specific interpretations and also, importantly, the role of local producers in indigenizing formats. In contrast, this paper underscores the need to reconsider how we conceptualize the local and investigate the role of “hyper-local” or sub-national levels of producers, production work flows, activities and decision making that is intrinsic to the business of (re)producing global formats.

In studying the making of *Pop Idol* into *Indian Idol* I conducted production ethnography in India, in 2010, and traced the production structure from Singapore (offices of Fremantle, Asia, which owns the *Idol* format) to Mumbai (television studios hub in India) to Balkeshwar, Agra (a small town in Uttar Pradesh, India, the home-town of one of the top *Idol* contestants whose journey I followed in particular). In doing so I encountered a motley crew of individuals – singing, dancing or acting teachers; talent scouts, managers and so on – who are engaged, officially or unofficially, in re-producing the format into its local avatar. They may provide logistical support, such as, organizing auditions or road rallies invoking communities to vote for particular hometown contestants; or serve an ideological function of lending social and moral credibility to the appeals embedded in reality TV shows in various social-cultural events organized in their specific localities. These “satellite producers”, as I call them, orbit around national level producers; are informally connected to the production regime and hired on short-term, as-needed basis; sometimes acknowledged in the budget but not always.

In other words, the global circuitry of format production (that this paper focuses on) cannot be conceptualized around a binary of global and local producers. Rather it is a three-tiered system: 1. global format executives at the top, tasked with maintaining format branding despite different localized iterations in different cultural markets; 2. national level of producers, formally contracted to reproduce the format in keeping with local market needs; and 3. a hyper-local level of satellite producers, who are socially-culturally rooted in the “heartlands” or small towns and emerging markets that national and international television executives aim to reach. The satellite producers, though located far from the mega cities and media hubs, serve as a crucial logistical and ideological mediator in the transnational flow of television formats.

For example, one of the core brand appeals of the *Idol* format, as emphasized by a Fremantle executive I spoke with, is the idea that talent and ambition to win can make one into a star. The credibility of the show is built around the idea that if an individual has talent then s/he can win, irrespective of class, gender or other forms of social marginalization. Indian producers on the other hand emphasize how contestants need to be camera savvy and have presentation skills to win audience votes, more than talent per se. One of the biggest production hurdles they face is the need to find contestants who not only sing well but also more importantly, know how to project emotions on camera and be entertaining. *Indian Idol* producers, as a result, turn to satellite producers who organize contests such as *U.P. Idol* – a hyper-local music competition and cultural event in the state of Uttar Pradesh (U.P.) - which mimics the *Idol* format and serves as an informal route for aspiring contestants to network with satellite producers who in turn connect them to the Mumbai based *Indian Idol* producers. *U.P. Idol* thus operates to acculturate

contestants with presentation skills, creating a culture where self-branding and self-promotion is both expected and accepted as norm, and thereby facilitating the production needs of *Indian Idol*.

When global, local and hyper-local producers interact to reproduce a format it is a structured encounter, revealing how cultural production is being reorganized around different forms of cultural capital at different levels of an interlinked industry. But it is also a performance as producers react and reenact the script, the ideas and the narratives enshrined in the format while adapting it. As producers improvise and extemporize what emerges is a *performative encounter*, a self-conscious cultural mediation, adjustment and alignment. The work of satellite producers exposes the performative nature of this encounter most prominently as they focus on how to act *as if* one is on camera, though it characterizes format adaptation as a whole. It is important to explore the moments and practices of performative encounters (as opposed to interpretive analysis of media texts or structural, political-economic analysis) to uncover the points of connection and disconnection that undergird global cultural flows. Doing so helps us understand how seemingly contradictory stances coincide and are managed under conditions of cultural globalization, allowing common sense and consent around a particular ideology to operate despite the vastly different social-cultural histories and realities of everyday existence.