Producing Reality: Television Formats and Reality TV in the Canadian Context

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ABSTRACT This article explores the rise of formatted reality production and consumption in Canada, paying particular attention to their impact on global and local industry and culture. Attention is paid to how cultural production in the Canadian television industry is implicated in contemporary global and national political economic contexts. The study utilizes a political economic framework in order to situate industry reports, conferences/trade shows, ratings data and interviews with industry members. The overall objective is to better understand the Canadian landscape of original reality television, Canadian format adaptations, and imported formatted American format adaptations. At issue are funding mechanisms, technology, policy, and culture.

KEYWORDS Reality TV; Format; International; Political economy; Cultural production

Introduction

Global economic, political, and technological changes have reshaped many aspects of the global television industry. Neoliberal models of governance (McChesney, 2001; Miller, 2007), together with new media technologies and the international expansion of capital, have altered cultural production. We have seen the proliferation of national and global TV channels, new distribution mechanisms and outlets, increasing privatization and defunding of public systems, the fragmentation of audiences and advertising dollars, and production practices that favour cheaper and risk-averse product that...
is less reliant on unionized labour (McChesney, 2001; Miller, 2007; Selznick, 2008). The international expansion of capital has always been a way to increase profit in commercial media systems, but in recent years, the burgeoning need for “producers and distributors ... to produce programming with an international audience in mind” (Selznick, 2008, p. 3) has led to a variety of new cultural forms. This is coupled with de- or re-regulatory neoliberal shifts in cultural policies and production practices (McChesney, 2001; Miller, 2007), resulting in the increased power of global private interests. Reality TV programming has blossomed worldwide in this context (Magder, 2004; Raphael, 2004); in particular, the international format has exploded (Holmes & Jermyn, 2004; Moran, 1998; Moran & Malbon, 2006; Selznick, 2008). Formats—program concepts, created by a production team for the purpose of licensing internationally to national production firms—are standardized television shows with multiple international iterations. In one year, a format can be adapted in numerous markets; for example, The Weakest Link has 60 simultaneous versions, creating a global array of television programs (Brook, 2010).

It is important to understand how cultural production in the Canadian television industry is implicated in the global political economic realities of reality TV and formatting in order to analyze the cultural implications of neoliberal and global television practices. A growing body of key works has addressed the Canadian reality context (notably Baltruschat, 2009; Byers, 2008; de B'béri & Middlebrook, 2009; Druick & Kotsopoulos, 2008; Foster, 2009; 2013), and this article engages in this dialogue. Much more work remains to be carried out in order to better understand these trends as they continue to play out, and as policy and industry continue to (re)shape culture. Specifically, this article offers an institutional overview of the Canadian reality TV industry, presenting a picture of the political economic landscape of reality programming in Canada—how original Canadian reality programs, imported reality shows, and Canadian format adaptations create the reality TV industry in Canada, and in turn structure production and viewing practices. The article addresses the uniqueness of the Canadian context, where American imports typically out-rate and out-last their Canadian partners, yet, when considered together, work to create a new transnational conceptualization of “the program” itself. The article presents the theoretical approach adopted for the analysis, then moves to a discussion of the rise of formats and key players in the formatting industry before addressing the programming and ratings landscape of reality TV and formats in Canada, which includes attention to funding and technology, and how Canadian television is changing.

Theory/method/approach

This work is based on the established tradition of critical political economy (Meehan, 2005; Mosco, 1997; Wasko, 2005), which “examines the production, distribution, and consumption of resources, including communication and information resources” (Meehan, Mosco & Wasko, 1993, p. 107). As Meehan and Wasko’s (2013a; 2013b) defense of political economy (and complementary traditions of materialist cultural studies) suggests, such an approach is well suited to addressing the concerns at the heart of this article.
As such, this work is informed by four foundational bases for research into the political economy of communication (Golding & Murdock, 1991; Mosco, 1997): historical specificity, commitment to examining the social totality, moral philosophical concerns, and a dedication to praxis or social transformation. Historical political and economic trajectories and current specificities of, as well as the wider social practices bound up in, reality television in Canada will be evident throughout the article. The moral philosophical framework here can be understood to mean an interrogation of the social values reflected in political economic decisions (Mosco, 1997); that is, those that are involved in the allocation of social resources as they pertain to the television industry. Thus, this analysis “goes beyond technical issues of efficiency to engage with basic moral questions of justice, equity and the public good” (Golding & Murdock in Mosco, 1997, p. 34). Such a perspective “provides a strong defense of democracy, equality, and the public sphere in the face of powerful private interests” (Mosco, 1997, p. 36). In this vein, how reality TV in Canada, both original and formatted, is linked to concerns over the allocation of resources, such as the public airwaves, funding, and deployment of national cultural content policies, are central issues in this article. Finally, praxis, or critique for social change, in light of the moral philosophical underpinning, would suggest that the study holds implications for policy, funding, and production changes that would contribute to democratic cultural processes.

Engaging in an institutional analysis, this article seeks to understand the industry as a whole (Meehan, Mosco & Wasko, 1993). In light of this, the article focuses on Canada but situates the Canadian context within the broader global formatting industry. Sources of data include documents, such as trade press news, industry reports in trade publications, and government documents; participant observation of show tapings and live tours; attendance at industry conferences/trade shows (MipTV and MipFormats); and personal interviews with industry members.

The rise of franchised formats and the formatting industry
Despite earlier roots (Moran, 1998), since the late 1990s and into the 2000s, formats have become more crucial during program development, holding the promise of future international adaptations that would help return revenues to the format developer and potentially to the first market’s broadcaster (as co-producer, and biggest financier). Crucial to format development is its standardization, allowing a firm to retain control over its recipe and adaptations, and assisting local production teams in executing the elements of the format. These “format points” include the key technical, creative, and visual cues used to define the program; for example, graphics, script, story board, music, performance, casting, set design and layout, camera work, etc. (FRAPA, 2011). The format is delocalized (Straubhaar, 2007), leaving room for each locale who licenses it to incorporate cultural specificity into the production, making the adaptation palatable to local audiences by reflecting local/national language, cultural values, and symbolic markers (Straubhaar, 2007; Waisbord, 2004). Such a process can be applied to comedy, drama, or reality programming.

In Canada, most of the format adaptations are reality programs, rather than comedy or drama. Phil King, president of CTV programming and sports, explains this:
I’d argue there’s no greater chance of success with a scripted format than with an original drama or comedy… The trick is that people in the country can’t have seen the original. It has to be new to them… We would not even dream of doing a Canadian version of a US [drama or comedy] show. (C21, 2013a, p. 7)

As such, both reality TV and formats work together in reproducing each other in the Canadian market—when thinking of “formats in Canada,” reality TV is necessarily implicated, and vice versa. This is important in understanding the reality TV landscape in Canada.

Format production and international trade has expanded significantly over the past decade. From 2002–2004, when format trade began being tracked in an organized fashion, 259 original formats existed. From 2006–2009, this number nearly doubled to 445. These 445 formats were adapted in over 45 territories, amounting to a total of 1262 adaptations (FRAPA, 2009b). Over the last few years, the numbers have grown, and over 60 territories are importing formats, with dozens of the same program airing local adaptations simultaneously. Today, annual format trade is worth over $1 billion US (Coad, 2009).

The industrial importance of formats is also evidenced by the time and attention devoted specifically to this business model. In 2010, the premier international television industry market, MipTV, added a two-day precursor, MipFormats, signalling that the industry has elevated the format to a new level. Held in April in Cannes each year, MipFormats brings together global broadcasters/networks and format developers, buyers and sellers securing international sales. Additionally, format trade publications have sprung up, with literature catering to industry insiders. FRAPA, the Format Recognition and Protection Association (established in 2000), exists to assist independent producers with bible development and contract negotiation, as well as to provide legal aid for mediation and dispute resolution (FRAPA, 2011).

The reasons why formats have exploded on international television screens are directly related to wider global television and cultural industry trends that have precipitated the rise of reality TV in general. These reasons include increasing privatization in global television markets and technological proliferation, creating the need to fill more airtime (Holmes & Jermyn, 2004; Waisbord 2004); economic changes in program financing, and profit-sharing, including new relationships between broadcasters and producers (Lin, Interview, 2013; Magder 2004); consolidation and integration in television markets and higher barriers to entry for smaller firms; and, the drive to employ non-union labor, which is cheaper, more flexible, and can be used to try to deflect strikes. These shifts have begun to be addressed by various writer, director, and performer unions by both contesting non-union labour and adapting contracts to capture work in reality TV as unionized (Raphael, 2004; Saxe, Interview, 2013). These conditions exist in the Canadian context, and will be addressed throughout.

Also, unlike imports, formats can qualify under cultural policy initiatives in a number of national markets, including national quotas, tax incentives/rebates, or scheduling priority (Moran, 1998; Selznick, 2008). Such is the case in Canada. The Broadcasting Act Section 5(e) mandates that the Canadian Radio Television Commission (CRTC)
facilitate the provision of Canadian programs to Canadians (CRTC, 2013; Edwardson, 2008). Canadian content quotas have been set for television broadcasters at 60 percent of their yearly programming, and 50 percent of primetime programming. In order to determine what counts as CanCon, productions must apply for Canadian program certification, based on a system that rewards points for key elements of a production being Canadian. When examining publicly posted Certification lists (see CRTC, 2010), it is evident that most of the reality format adaptations are deemed Canadian, thus qualifying for prominent scheduling timeslots and access to primetime audiences and advertising dollars, as well as funding sources. An additional concern is that these adaptations are often international co-productions between a Canadian organization and a non-Canadian one, and, as such, the international company avails itself of policy initiatives intended to boost or protect the national cultural industry (see Selznick, 2008, for an excellent discussion of global co-productions).

While format adaptations can support production, and are sometimes welcomed by domestic producers and crews who are happy to find work in a competitive and unstable industry (Lin, Interview, 2013), they also arguably take advantage of a loophole in Canadian cultural policy. Instead of supporting local, original productions, the policies disproportionately benefit the larger international format and its non-Canadian holder. It can further be argued that formats have been replacing local/national programming, rather than supplementing or assisting it.

**Key players in formatting**

Many countries are active in format trade. The UK leads in annual number of exported formats, with 146; USA is next with 87; the Netherlands, with 35; Argentina, with 28; Sweden with 22; Germany, 21; Spain, 17; Australia, France, and Japan, with 16 each; Italy, 13; Denmark, 11; Canada, 9; and Norway, 7 (FRAPA, 2009b). The UK exports almost twice as much as the US and four times as many as any other country, and the USA exports more than twice as many as any other country (except for the UK). Clearly, some of the larger markets are dominating format trade, but firms in smaller countries are also active globally. This has been cited as a small but welcome chance for smaller nations to be more successful in the international television market (Torre, 2010), but the reality of the dominance of the UK and the US should not be ignored, particularly as they relate to the English-speaking Canadian context.

Format developers/producers include some major production houses or networks that include a formatting arm, developing formats to license worldwide—such as ITV, the UK’s largest television program producer, which produces original programming but also holds a robust catalogue of formats licensed globally. The BBC has also successfully developed and licensed out a number of global formats. In addition, a new breed of TV producer has arisen—a number of firms now specialize in format development, notably Endemol in the Netherlands; Fremantle, 19 Entertainment, and Shine in the UK; and Red Arrow in Germany (among others). Formats are reshaping how old firms create product, but are also spawning new types of businesses that specialize in this production model.

In Canada, vertical integration means that some of the broadcasters are also producers (Shaw Media, CTV, etc.); however, Canada also has its own production firms
that specialize in reality TV—both format adaptation as well as original domestic productions—and sometimes these firms co-produce programs with the network and the franchise holder. For instance, one of the major players in Canadian format adaptation is Toronto-based Insight Productions, which produces or co-produces Big Brother Canada, Amazing Race Canada, Canadian Idol, Project Runway Canada, Canada’s Got Talent, Intervention Canada, and Top Chef Canada. Insight Productions is also the producer of CBC’s original reality program (not a format), Battle of the Blades, the popular reality figure skating competition. In addition to Insight, Temple Street Productions and Cineflix are major players in production, with smaller firms, such as Paperny Films and Force Four Entertainment, also in reality production, formats and original. The reality production market in Canada has thus become quite consolidated, serviced by only a handful of production groups. Independent producers do exist, but it is becoming increasingly difficult to work as a small independent producer, given the connections that the bigger organizations have, and their ability to leverage past relationships for future programs (Terry, Interview, 2013). Formats have insinuated themselves into Canada’s television production ecology—production firms and individual workers work on whichever production is available, with little differentiation between types of productions.

The programming and ratings landscape of formats and original reality programming in Canada

Broadly speaking, Canadian television features significantly more imports than Canadian programming. In an annual CRTC report, the commission calculates that “in 2011, 81% of English and 70% of French-language drama and comedy programs were non-Canadian, respectively” (CRTC, 2012, p. iii). These figures are rather striking, if unsurprising, given the history of Canadian television and its relationship with American imports, and indeed one of the reasons behind basic television regulation (Beaty & Sullivan, 2006). Of course, drama and comedy are not reality TV, but the implications are the same. Here, networks are choosing to air non-Canadian programming, thus further driving demand for American programming.1

In Canada, the reality TV market is no different. For the most part, it consists of the imported American versions of formats, the Canadian versions, and, lagging far behind, original Canadian productions that are not format adaptations. The success of the American format has become a programming and risk-reduction strategy for Canadian networks. American format adaptations airing as canned imports have traditionally preceded the development of an English-Canadian version, if a Canadian version is even made. The American version of Idol, So You Think You Can Dance, Project Runway, Next Top Model, Big Brother, Are You Smarter than a 5th Grader, Intervention, Real Housewives, The Voice, and Amazing Race were all aired in Canada as imports, via the American adaptation, and garnered high ratings well before the Canadian version was developed a year or more later. The network that aired the American version is often (though not always) the same one to air, and sometimes co-produce, the Canadian version. American television is known industry-wide as particularly risk-averse (MipFormats, 2013). If Canadian format adaptation mostly lags one generation behind, their slow adaptation suggests an even more risk-averse market.
Following is a list of the major networks and some of their American/Canadian format programs (selected):

As Table 1 shows, in most, but not all, cases, the same broadcaster airs both the American and Canadian format. This means maximum revenue with less risk. It also

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Network</th>
<th>American Only Versions of Formats</th>
<th>Canadian and American Adaptation Pairs</th>
<th>Canadian Only Version of Formats</th>
<th>Original Canadian Reality Program</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CTV</td>
<td>The Voice, Dancing with the Stars, Shark Tank</td>
<td>Amazing Race/Amazing Race Canada, Master Chef/Master Chef Canada/Master Chef Junior; So You Think You Can Dance/SYTYCD Canada (now cancelled), America’s Next Top Model/Canada’s Next Top Model (shared with City, now cancelled), American Idol/Canadian Idol (now cancelled)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Global</td>
<td>Big Brother, Survivor</td>
<td>The Bachelor/The Bachelorette/The Bachelor Canada; America’s Got Talent/Canada’s Got Talent</td>
<td>Second season of Project Runway Canada</td>
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<tr>
<td>City</td>
<td>The X Factor, The Voice</td>
<td>The Bachelor/The Bachelorette/The Bachelor Canada; America’s Got Talent/Canada’s Got Talent</td>
<td>Departures (formerly on OLN)</td>
<td>Mantracker (formerly on OLN)</td>
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<td>CBC</td>
<td></td>
<td>Storage Wars Canada</td>
<td>Dragons’ Den, Over the Rainbow, How Do You Solve a Problem Like Maria</td>
<td>Battle of the Blades, Redemption Inc., In the Kitchen, The Week the Women Went (now cancelled)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Slice</td>
<td>Big Brother After Dark, Kitchen Nightmares</td>
<td>Real Housewives Atlanta/Real Housewives of Orange Count/Real Housewives of New Jersey/Real Housewives of New York/Real Housewives of Vancouver (Shaw Media); Intervention/Intervention Canada; Project Runway (US)/Project Runway Canada (first season)</td>
<td>Big Brother Canada</td>
<td>Bubble Wrap Kids</td>
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Table 1: Reality Program Origins (selected)²
means that more programming space is taken up by two versions of the same program, thus leaving less space for non-formatted domestic programming, whether reality TV or otherwise. In other instances, two different broadcasters air the American and Canadian versions, but both channels are owned by the same corporate parent (e.g., Rogers: City, Bio, OLN; Shaw: Global, Slice, HGTV, Food Network, History, Showcase).

Essentially, airing two versions of the format reshapes how “the program” is defined. In this situation, “the program” is the transnational intertext (Meehan, 1991) of the American and Canadian version. This is a new way of thinking about programming and viewing reality TV, where the program is inherently transnational, and consists of multiple programs, in addition to other intertexts. Multiplatforming, discussed above, live tours (Idols, SYTYCD, Dancing With the Stars), and now a luxury cruise in a BBC Worldwide partnership with P&O cruises for a DWTS/Strictly Come Dancing cruise (Stephens, 2013), also work to stretch the brand across media, and also stretch and redefine the experience of the “program” as an intertext (Meehan, 1991). All of these products become part of the program in a transnational, intertextual and multiplatform process, which also includes the merchandise available. Such an expansion monopolizes audiences’ time, energy, and money, potentially further commodifying them.

The programming strategy of American/Canadian format pairs is to leverage the American version as a lead-in to the Canadian season. For instance, since the private networks CTV and Global (and other cable networks like Slice that air Canadian formats) are dominated by American scheduling and the dates set by American networks (C21, 2013a), Canadian product fills the time in between American programs. As a result, Canadian versions run in off-seasons—CTV aired its imported American So You Think You Can Dance simultaneously with Fox, then scheduled So You Think You Can Dance Canada to end a week or two before the American version was set to resume. Similarly, when CTV announced it was developing Amazing Race Canada, Phil King, president of programming and sports, said,

We’ll probably back Amazing Race Canada into the beginning of the American Amazing Race, which begins in the fall … We either have to do it between the two cycles—December and January, which is kind of lousy for sales—or wait until the US one is over. [The Canadian shows] can’t survive on Fridays or Saturdays so we need to get them into the Sunday-to-Thursday timeslots, hence summer makes the most sense. (quoted in C21, 2013a, p. 6)³

This works to extend the overall season for the format, as the two national adaptations work synergistically to support one another rather than airing in the same season and competing with one another for ratings or ad revenue. The lead-in effect of the American show, with its proven ratings, thus provides a solid foundation for viewership of the Canadian version, and instead of the “cannibalization of revenues” (Torre, 2010, pp. 9-10), we witness the reverse.

To turn to a ratings analysis, in 2012–2013, Amazing Race (US import, Season 21) rated as Canada’s top reality program, and the third most popular show in the fall with an average minute audience rating (AMA) of 2.7 million viewers. The second highest rated reality show was Global’s Survivor (American import), with 2.67 million viewers. Dancing with the Stars (American import) was next with 1.9 million, the 13th most pop-
ular nationwide (C21, 2013a). If we take a snapshot of one week in August 2013, (August 19–25, 2013), we see Amazing Race Canada as the top show, Masterchef (American) as second, American drama import Under the Dome third, Big Brother (American) coming in three times in the top 30, and other realities interspersed with popular dramas and comedies, such as Big Bang Theory, Two and a Half Men, and news programming (Bell Media, 2013a). Of the top 10 shows of that week, the only Canadian shows were Amazing Race Canada and CTV News, ranked 9th. The rest were American imports.

The strength of the American imports has helped inspire Canadian adaptation. The strategy paid off with several Canadian adaptations—Canadian Idol, SYTYC D Canada, and Amazing Race Canada—premiered with record-breaking ratings. Most recently, Amazing Race Canada debuted in 2013 with 3.5 million viewers, bigger, ratings-wise, than the first season debuts of Survivor, American Idol, Big Brother, X Factor and even CBS’ Amazing Race series, which has aired for 21 seasons … on CTV. (Vlessing, 2013)

In fact, Amazing Race Canada was extremely successful, with the strongest premiere of the year in 2013 and earning higher ratings than the previous year’s American version. One consideration is to recall that Canadian shows are placed in off seasons. Amazing Race Canada premiered in the summer, when many American networks are not airing their prime programming. Remarkably, Amazing Race Canada ended its first season as the top-ranked show, with 3.5 million viewers, rounding off its record-breaking debut. It beat American sitcom Big Bang Theory, which had been in the top spot for several years, but which ranked second in 2013 with 3-million viewers. The American import of Amazing Race 22 and 23 ranked third, with 2.5 million. Of the top 10 shows, Amazing Race Canada and Hockey Night in Canada (8th, at 2.22 million), were the only Canadian programs. Amazing Race Canada was the only Canadian program in the top 10 reality shows (Bell Media, 2013b). It is significant that the Amazing Race franchise took first and third place, dominating the ratings, hence the public imagination. But it is even more significant that the Canadian adaptation beat the American, as well as every other show. These ratings have implications for the potential of Canadian adaptations to actually draw Canadian audiences. Undoubtedly building off the American version’s strong success, the Canadian version features some known Canadian celebrities, and a variety of beloved Canadian locations, potentially appealing to Canadian audiences. The placement of the show in the summer season is also a potential contributing factor to its success—if it were placed in direct competition with the fall lineups, it is unclear how it would have fared. The program strategy of placing it in the summer and leading up to a popular American import was quite successful.

Another barometer of success is the number of seasons a show runs. To date, Canadian versions of formatted series do not outlast their American counterparts. For example, Canadian Idol only ran six seasons, while American Idol is currently auditioning for its 14th season. Likewise, SYTYC D Canada only ran four seasons, while the American version has completed 11. The same fate has been met by Project Runway Canada and Canada’s Next Top Model—the former only running two seasons; the latter running three. Both shows’ American versions are still airing in the US and Canada—
Top Model is in its 21st “cycle.” This demonstrates that the Canadian adaptations are still unable to compete with American imports, which can outlast the Canadian ones partly due to success in the large American market, partly due to the more expansive budget that most of the American networks and production firms hold, and partly due to the market power of the major American conglomerates in setting expectations and tastes for programming. Lower numbers sometimes lead to popular perception that the Canadian shows are of lesser quality—lesser talent, lesser production, lesser celebrity factors. Long has the quality of Canadian productions been at issue (Beaty & Sullivan, 2006); formats continue this trend, but in a new context.

Not all Canadian format adaptations start after a successful airing of the imported American adaptation—occasionally a Canadian firm adapts the format directly. Several examples are found on the CBC—Over the Rainbow and How Do You Solve a Problem Like Maria are both single-season performance competitions licensed from the UK, aiming to cast leads in Toronto-based musical theatre productions of Wizard of Oz (Dorothy, in Rainbow) and The Sound of Music (Maria, in Maria). Most notably is the CBC’s Dragons’ Den, a format adapted from the BBC version (after having originated in Japan), and produced by Sony Pictures. The program was the network’s highest rated show in Fall 2012 (C21, 2013a), and won the Canadian Screen Award for best reality series. The show brings entrepreneurs before a panel of successful business people, in the hopes of gaining financing for their project. After the strong success of Dragons’ Den in Canada, American network ABC licensed the format from Sony and named it Shark Tank. Two Canadian judges, Kevin O’Leary and Robert Herjavec, appear on both Canadian and American versions, with Herjavec recently announcing his departure from the CBC show. Julie Bristow, head of CBC sports and entertainment, states that the American production company, Mark Burnett Productions, worked with her Canadian producers and editors to develop the American version with the wisdom of Canadian team (Wong, 2013). CTV imports and airs this American version, going into its fifth season, in competition with the CBC’s Dragons’ Den. Here, the Canadian version and its popularity preceded the American, and CTV has capitalized on the myth of “America” meaning “success.” In an interview with The Star, Herjavec claimed that the American version, as aired in the U.S., is “in a bigger league” than the Canadian, garnering over four times the viewers, and serving an economy that has more production opportunities, thus drawing more talented entrepreneurs to the program. Here, the transcendence of the Canadian by entering the American market is viewed as success.

In addition to adapting formats, Canada has begun developing its own formats for export, beginning to engage in the format industry in a different way. It might come as a surprise that one organization noted for this strategy is the CBC. Bristow states:

[b]ecause we live next to the US, Canadians have to produce shows that are just as competitive. And when we create original formats like Redemption Inc. or Cover Me Canada or Canada’s Smartest Person—if they can be successful here they can be successful globally. (quoted in C21, 2013b, p. 25)

While Cover Me was cancelled in 2012 after one season due to the 10% overall budget cut from the Canadian government, the show was sold to Enlight Media, an emerging company in China, which has already produced adaptations of X Factor China and
China’s Got Talent (Ritchie, 2013). There may be more efforts to export formats to help finance future projects by capitalizing on successful programs.

Non-format original reality TV programming is much more rare in Canada than adaptations of global formats. A majority of the original, non-formatted reality shows are found on the cable networks, and often in the vein of factual and lifestyle programming, which have lower budgets and are able to survive with lower ratings. In particular, HGTV Canada and Food Network Canada (see Romeo, 2011) feature a substantial amount of original Canadian reality programming for their specialty networks. OLN features several outdoor/action related reality shows such as Departures and Mantracker, which also air on City; Slice airs Cineflix’s original reality-parenting program Bubble Wrap Kids. CBC has also created other notable original reality programs, including Battle of the Blades, a competition that brings together famous (male) NHL hockey players and famous (female) figure skaters. Hosted by skater Scott Hamilton, the men have to learn how to figure skate; famous hockey and skating judges, including the iconic Don Cherry, score the performances, and one team is eliminated each week. The show builds on basic Canadian gender-identity stereotypes, both hockey and figure skating, as well as the brand of CBC in featuring sports, particularly its flagship program, Hockey Night in Canada, which, as noted above, garners high ratings and may help contribute to the synergistic audience for Battle of the Blades.

**Questions of format content**

While a full comparison of content is beyond the scope of this article, which is focusing on the industrial aspect of reality and formats in Canada, it is worth making a brief comment that the actual content of format adaptations has also been a point of contention, internationally and in Canada. Formats and their adaptations have been accused of cultural homogenization and uninspired replication, with set characters, procedures, and storylines. Canadian Idol has been accused of copying American Idol so closely that the judges even mimicked the American group—the woman, the mean one, and the African judge (with Canada adding a fourth judge, like the British version). Beaty and Sullivan (2006) note that Canadian Idol was “numbingly formulaic,” and boldly state that

> [w]hen Canadian programming consists of little more than inserting Ben Mulroney into cutaway segments during the Academy Awards, it is clear that the notion of Canadian content is increasingly bereft of meaning. (p. 70)

Likewise, Michele Byers (2008) debunks the myth of multicultural representation on Canadian Idol. Programming that claims to be about and for Canadians, by simply filling a delocalized format plan may be seen to cater to flat, stereotypical, and/or otherwise problematic visions of a nation’s many cultures.

**Changing financing policies and their implications in a transmedia context**

Formats are implicated in new financing schemes, which are part of broader shifts related to reality TV. Some examples include ad revenue sharing between the producer and the network, product placement/product integration being woven into agreements, merchandising, and integrated technologies designed to produce revenue
through pay-per-access, ad sales, or multiplatforming (Magder, 2004) or integrating “transmedia” formats—intensifying viewers’ relationship with the program by expanding their exposure through “second screen” integration of websites, blogs, social media, and apps.

In Canada, television financing is tied to the broadcast licence, which triggers funding from other public and private sources, such as the Canada Media Fund (CMF), formerly known as the Canada Television Fund (see Tinic, 2005), and federal or provincial tax credits (DOC, 2013; Lin, Interview, 2013; Terry, Interview, 2013; Van Beusekom, Interview, 2013). Depending on the type or genre of programming, other public or private funding may be available, such as from the National Film Board, Canada Arts Council, or the Ontario Media Development Corporation (OMDC), and other organizations. For independent television series producers, however, the broadcaster’s approval is necessary for financing projects. Projects co-produced by a broadcaster clearly have an advantage in financing and distribution as well.

In the past, it was possible for producers to finance almost all of their production through the broadcast licence—perhaps 80 percent coming from the broadcaster, the rest through tax credits or minor funds. Today, however, the licensing fee is a much smaller part of the budget, and much more funding needs to be sought. In fact, broadcasters now also want an equity position with the produced program. One producer I interviewed noted that these changes require producers to work harder to make the same amount of money (Lin, Interview, 2013). This can be seen as an intensification of producers’ labour.

The CMF, as the largest funding organization for television programming in Canada, provided 40 percent of overall television program funding in 2010, and 42 percent in 2011 (CRTC, 2012), awarding over $360 million annually (CMF, 2013). In the shift from the CTF to the CMF, the agency has updated its priorities to include not just television programming but also digital media. They currently have two funding streams—convergent, and experimental. The CMF states that the streams “are designed to encourage production in all regions of Canada and in the variety of languages spoken by Canadians” and are meant to support underrepresented genres of drama, documentary, variety and performing arts, and children and youth. The convergent stream supports content that will be converged between television and other media platforms. The project must be multi-platform, covering at least two platforms (one must be television). The experimental stream funds the development of innovative, interactive digital media content and software applications. Projects funded under the Experimental Program are to be developed for commercial potential by the Canadian media industry or public use by Canadians. (CMF, 2013)

Project guidelines make clear that the CMF believes that television is changing, and new technologies—second screens—are essential to funding any program. As a funding source, the CMF is driving content towards digital media.

As an example of the CMF’s reshaping of television programs, at MipFormats, CMF’s Catalina Briceño held up Canadian adaptations of formats Over the Rainbow (CBC) and La Voix (TVA, in Québec) as examples of programs that have incorporated second
screens in a successful way. In a personal interview, she said, “It’s really about making TV more fun.” Stating that distracted viewers are now multitasking while watching TV, she believes that audience levels of engagement improve with interactive technologies, and that technology and content “must walk hand in hand” (Briceño, Interview, 2013).

For La Voix, that pairing is a result of a partnership between TVA and Ex Machina, a Dutch firm that creates interactive technologies for the Québec version as well as several other territories’ adaptations. In a personal interview, Ex Machina’s Frank Van Oirschot (2013) explained that their second-screen development process is not standard across the format, nor do they hold rights to interactivity on all adaptations of the format.

Their strategy is to localize all apps to each national market, to test it in-house, then to have the broadcaster test and provide feedback before going live. They continue to operate and service the app for the broadcaster during the season (2013). Thus, broadcasters help drive the technological development of second screens, tailoring use and data capture towards their own needs.

Such apps and other social media platforms serve simultaneously as potential revenue streams, as some apps have the potential to collect data from audience members. At MipTV and MipFormats, several panels, such as “How to make your format transmedia,” united tech firms, format developers, and broadcasters to stress the wealth of data that can be collected through social media. They noted that free apps and platforms can garner four times the response than those for which users must pay. The real value to the broadcaster is to entertain the audience so that they remain with the program and help promote the program through tweets, Facebook likes, and so on; so that the audience continues to be exposed to program sponsorship and advertising; and finally, so that the audience continues to allow the use or sale of their collected data.

Data mining raises a number of crucial questions about the new conceptualization of the viewer—political economic concepts of the audience commodity, traced back to Dallas Smythe, have long articulated the work of an audience in relation to commercials and ratings (Meehan, 2005; Mosco, 1997). Here, the viewer’s labour is now further commodified through data mining. Additionally, privacy concerns are also raised in the collection and sale of personal information. Finally, the viewer is situated as a consumer above any other conceptualization of audience (rather than citizens who are members of a public; see Foster, 2013). One of the main issues with second screens is that the business models and external funding agencies are driving these changes. Both funding mechanisms as well as data-mining purposes for advertising and promotion are incorporated directly into Canadian television, with reality and formats leading the charge.

Conclusion
As presented, the central issues regarding the place of formats in television industries encapsulate a variety of economic, political, and cultural concerns bound up in global television and culture. In Canada, reality TV, and format adaptation specifically, is implicated in international shifts in television production and policy that seems to enlist cultural policy for profit and commodification. Hence, given the evidence presented here, it is possible to conclude with a general political economic critique of the Canadian reality TV and formatting industry.
Reality TV in Canada is bound up in the global political, economic, and cultural changes of neoliberalism, where “deregulatory” changes favour global corporations and peel away protections for smaller national industries, workers, and cultures. Particularly acute in the Canadian case is the unbalanced, yet unsurprising, influx of American reality imports, at the expense of both Canadian adaptations to global formats and original Canadian programming. Both the typically lower ratings and the short-lived nature of the Canadian format adaptations’ success indicate that they live in the shadow of American television. Such a landscape has implications for continued international imbalance in the television industry, where American organizations and priorities, broadly speaking, are leaders in shaping the Canadian TV industry. Further, reality TV in Canada highlights a set of practices that seems to replace Canadian drama and documentary, allow funders to drive television production with the incorporation of new technology (which can invade viewers' privacy), favour the large companies in the oligopolistic Canadian television market, and constrict the opportunities for union labour to work in the field that they have chosen. It appears that, paradoxically, Canadian television regulations have shifted to encourage such practices that they were originally established to combat.

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Notes
1. This plays out in overall ratings: the highest rated program of both 2011 and 2012 was Big Bang Theory, imported from the U.S., “with an average minute audience (AMA) of over 3.1 million [in 2011]. The highest rated Canadian-produced television series was the English-language drama, Combat Hospital, with an AMA of close to 1.8 million” (DOC, 2013, p. 14). This is almost half of the ratings of the American program. In 2012, top-ranked Big Bang rated 4.01 million. The only Canadian programs ranking in the top 30 in 2012 were Hockey Night in Canada, at 8th, with an AMA of 2.25 million; Flashpoint (in its final season), at 20th with an AMA of 1.65 million; and CTV Evening News, at 21st, with an AMA of 1.62 million. In fact, Big Bang Theory in syndication ranked 26th, at 1.43 million. Included in the mix were a variety of American imported reality shows (e.g., Amazing Race, Survivor, Dancing With the Stars, American Idol, X Factor, The Voice) (Bell Media, 2013a).

2. “Canadian Only Version of Formats” suggests a Canadian adaptation airing on that network in the absence of an American version that is imported and aired on that network. It does not preclude that the format has been adapted and aired in other countries (e.g., Dragon’s Den), or that the American version airs on a different channel (e.g., Big Brother).

3. One notable exception is Big Brother 9, which premiered in the winter of 2008, in between season 7, summer of 2007, and season 10, summer of 2008. CBS used this programming strategy to flex its muscles against the Writers Guild of America (WGA) strike in 2007–2008 (one of the issues at stake in the strike being unionization of reality TV writers).

4. How content in formats comes to be deemed, recognized, and celebrated as “Canadian,” is a longer and important project, and I have begun that work elsewhere. In a separate article (Quail, 2014), I demonstrate how So You Think You Can Dance Canada engages in “commercial nationalism,” wherein “Canadianness” is represented in stereotypical ways, in contrast to the US, and engaging in promotional culture.
How original Canadian productions, such as Battle of the Blades, compare textually to Canadian format adaptations would be a fruitful study for the future; due to space constraints, a full textual or discourse analysis is not possible alongside this political economic analysis, but again, is a worthy strand of analysis that I have begun elsewhere (see, for example, Quail, 2014), as have others mentioned above.

Interviews
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