Reality TV Formats: The Case of *Canadian Idol*

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Abstract: This paper discusses narrative development and audience interactivity in reality television, with a particular focus on the “format franchising processes” involving *Canadian Idol*. The staging of media events, recruitment of semi-professional performers, and immersive online environments emphasize the complexities of reality format adaptation, which involves the localization of global media texts.

Keywords: Mass communication; Production/co-production; Broadcasting; Internet; New media

Résumé : Cet article traite de développement narratif et d’interactivité avec le public à la télévision réalité tout en mettant un accent particulier sur les « processus de franchisage de formats » entourant *Canadian Idol*. La mise en scène d’événements médiatiques, le recrutement de chanteurs semi-professionnels et les environnements immersifs en ligne mettent en relief les complexités requises pour adapter un texte médiatique mondial aux particularités locales de la région où on le diffuse.

Mots clés : Communication de masse; Production/coproduction; Radiodiffusion; Internet ; Nouveaux médias

The surge of reality TV programs since 2000 can be traced back to tabloid-style documentaries, which first appeared in the late 1980s. Shows such as *America’s Most Wanted* (Heflin & Klein, 1988), *Cops* (Langley & Barbour, 1989), and *Crimewatch* (Gay, 1984) marked a fundamental shift from programming rooted in investigative journalism to documentaries of diversion and display (Corner, 2002). Their development was linked clearly to the emergence of multichannel television in the 1990s, which created the need for provocative programs to attract audiences in an increasingly competitive media environment. The proliferation of reality TV in Canada is also linked to changes in television program development, especially the emergence of “format franchising,” which is based on the adaptation of popular program concepts for different markets around the world (for example, *Canadian Idol*, *Canada’s Next Top Model*, and *Deal or No Deal)*.

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This article details how reality TV producers attempt to create all-enveloping experiences that transgress the boundaries of traditional broadcasts. They accomplish this by staging media events and engaging audiences in online environments. One reality format in particular—Canadian Idol (Bowlby & Brunton, 2003)—exemplifies how franchise format localization, or “glocalization,” involves the engagement of actual and virtual communities to ensure its successful adaptation for Canadian audiences.

The analysis presents key findings from a three-year research project on international co-productions and TV format franchising. The study highlights the importance of situating reality TV within its production context. In particular, it demonstrates the need to address the complex interplay between producers, interactive audiences, and cross-platform media that underlies the “format franchising” processes of programs such as Canadian Idol.

From documentaries to docu-soaps and game-docs
The emergence of reality TV represents a shift from what Kilborn (2003) calls the more “serious” representation of socio-historical events to programming that is produced predominantly for entertainment purposes. Reality programs are linked to different documentary forms, such as documentary journalism, cinéma vérité traditions, and the observational documentary. However, due to elements of popular entertainment programming (e.g., talk shows, game shows, and soap operas), reality TV ultimately creates its own generic map. Hill (2005, p. 50) suggests a fact/fiction continuum, which reflects the sliding scale of factuality in these programs. The continuum covers contemporary documentaries and popular factual entertainment ranging from docu-soaps and game-docs to makeovers and quiz shows.

Similarly to documentaries, reality programs aim for the “articulation of the authentic self” in order to depict “moments of truth” (Holmes, 2004, p 159). Tele-confessionals in designated video rooms and individual strategies for winning the game provide intimate accounts of unfolding events. Also, slightly off-the-mark camera angles and out-of-focus shots contribute to a sense of immediacy and intimacy with characters and suggest a “fly-on-the-wall” experience for viewers. Reality TV producers aim for this “tele-factuality” (Corner, 2002, p. 257), which is reflected in statements such as “the camera doesn’t lie, [e]specially up close” (Canada’s Next Top Model, Citytv, 2006). Similarly, the executive producer of Big Brother states, “I wanted it to look live and exciting. . . . [T]his was not meant to be a polished drama. We were filming it for real, and it was a virtue of the programme that viewers understood that” (Ruth Wrigley, cited in Ritchie, 2000, p. 11, italics added). Indeed, Lewis (2004) refers to a “tele-reality” into which people from the “everyday world” are submerged to perform their role. Viewers understand this blurring of boundaries between the public, private, and “adjacent realities” (Lewis, 2004, p. 295). And they find pleasure in looking for moments of “truth” that may shine through improvised performances (Hill, 2005).

Yet a closer look at the production context of reality TV reveals that such programs are highly contrived. Casting decisions and scripts linking locations and circumstances for the purpose of creating action and conflict frame many story lines (“Reality writer-anonymous,” 2005). A testimonial from Julia Corrigan, a
contestant on the BBC/Lion TV reality series *Castaways* (Mills, 2000), highlights this aspect of the genres:

I hate to admit it, but the television company obviously thought that some people/incidents were a lot more interesting than others in terms of storylines! Yet the darker side of that is that there was a bit of harrying going on to get us to do the things they wanted us to do. In the latter stages, there were lists on the wall about what we should talk about in video diaries. We did feel that events were being manipulated. (Corrigan, cited in Kibble-White, 2004, p. 25, emphasis in the original)

Thus, in spite of claims of “authenticity” and the showcasing of “real people,” reality TV programs are underlain by a subtext: the behind-the-scenes production and economic contexts that are not apparent to the viewer. Kilborn (2003) addresses this important aspect when he comments on the production context for *Castaways* (Mills, 2000):

What was of course not shown . . . were the potentially far more revealing discussions between key members of the production team concerning the structuring of the whole event: how the choice of specific participants might generate certain types of dramatic conflict, how the known likes and prejudices of the target audiences might be reflected in a particular mix of characters and how the needs of certain embryonic storylines might be served if certain casting decisions were made. (Kilborn, 2003, p. 86)

Another key characteristic of reality TV production is the incitement of “buzz” around shows in order to extend broadcasts into online environments and conversations outside scheduled air dates (Scannell, 2002). In the late 1990s, reality TV producers in the U.K. were the first to take advantage of new interactive, cross-platform modes of production with the *Idol* and *Big Brother* formats (Television Research Partnership, 2002; Wrigley, Powers, Green, & Jones, 2000). Reality TV producers in the U.S. and Canada (with shows such as *American Idol* and *Canada’s Next Top Model*) now also tap into new revenue streams generated from text-message votes, as well as downloadable ring-tones and music clips for cellphones.

To create interest in cross-platform interactivity—from voting for contestants to posting comments in chatrooms—producers use similar techniques to those used in soap opera production: multiple story lines, which focus on human relationships; close-up shots to connote intimacy; and heightened identification with characters through online blogs. In addition, they use “cliff-hangers” to entice audiences to return to the program the following week or to discuss potential outcomes with other viewers in chat rooms. Consequently, an important task for reality TV producers is the creation of interesting story lines through casting unusual characters and scripting dramatic narratives. In addition, producers stage media events in the form of open auditions, which transgress the boundaries of regular programming and work intertextually across multiple platforms and contexts. This point will be illustrated in more detail in the case study of *Canadian Idol*. 
Stories of change and transformation

The typical plot in reality programs involves a “story of change” (Hill, 2005). The transformation of characters is an integral part of most narrative structures, but stories of change in game-docs and talent contests follow a particular formula: they tend to be about attaining success through fame (usually short-lived), in addition to prize monies (or equivalent materials and goods) and contracts with prestigious organizations (e.g., a record company or modelling agency). Transformation processes in these programs therefore reflect predominant values in capitalist societies that place individual achievements above collective goals. The narratives are limited to the portrayal of people entrenched in competitive environments for personal gain and exclude social transformations that benefit society as a whole. Even in programs where alliances between contestants are encouraged, one individual’s selfish pursuit is rewarded in the end. According to Foster (2004), “The brand of reality depicted on Survivor reinforced the widespread notion that self-interest ultimately trumps self-reliance, just as it coincides with the formula for successful television programming: conflict is compelling and conflict sells” (p. 280). Similarly, reality TV producer Mark Burnett comments about Survivor (2000), “Compelling television comes from seeing rather ordinary people put in uncomfortable situations—social interactions, not in the peril of their lives. The best way to describe the show is social Darwinism” (as quoted in USA Today, 2000; italics added).

A key element in the transformation process in reality TV is the application of consumer products to enhance a character’s physical appearance (for example, Cover Girl cosmetics in America’s Next Top Model). The intertwining of dramatic narratives and product placements links the story of change to patterns of consumption. In addition, this places an emphasis on the exchange value of products rather than their use value (Jhally, 1987). For example, on the website for Canada’s Next Top Model (Manuel, 2006), each weekly episode is accompanied by a “resource guide” listing sponsors, designers, and vendors that are featured on the show. Stories of change, therefore, extend beyond the diegetic world of the program and signal to viewers and users of interactive media (e.g., Internet, PDAs, and video cellphones) that their own transformation can be achieved through the consumption of featured products, thus closing the circle of viewer identification with characters on the show.

Another narrative device is intervention by experts, often in the form of judging panels, which present obstacles, as well as opportunities, along the character’s journey. Their presence as gatekeepers adds drama to the narrative, as they select characters for the next stage of the contest and, ultimately, announce the winner. Part of this admittance to the next (or final) stage is the “reveal” of the “transformed character,” signifying the end of the character’s journey and the end of the series. According to Scannell (2002), a game-doc such as Big Brother has “from the start … a powerful drive toward a climactic moment of resolution” (p. 272) to complete its narrative structure of beginning, middle, and end. In programs such as American Idol (Fuller, 2002) and Canadian Idol (Bowlby & Brunton, 2003), the revelation of the final winner is staged as a special television spectacle, denoting the pinnacle of the series, which tends to draw the highest audience ratings.
Idol finales are broadcast live from special venues such as the Kodak Theatre (used for the Academy Awards) in Los Angeles or Toronto’s Roy Thompson Hall. They are also accompanied by special community events in the “home towns” of contestants. For example, in 2004, 5,000 people gathered in Saskatoon’s Credit Union Centre (formerly Saskatchewan Place) for the two-hour Canadian Idol finale, which was broadcast on two giant video screens. The community “came together” for the event to celebrate its local contestant Theresa Sokyrka, runner-up for the title of Canadian Idol, which ultimately went to her competitor, Kalan Porter:

The sight of Sokyrka on the big screens continually evoked ear-splitting screaming, clapping and cheering and some fans jumped out of their seats to get a better look at the hometown hero. At times, Credit Union Centre took on a New Year’s atmosphere as fans carried balloons, blew horns, threw confetti and did the wave. (Kachkowski, 2004)

In this instance, the narrative is intertwined with familiar cultural references and national sentiment to create maximum resonance for viewers. The result is a strong engagement with Canadian Idol, which has been referred to as one of the most watched programs in Canada’s television history (CTV, 2005).

In the lead-up to the finale, the weekly “television stage” for many reality programs is a “self-contained space” (usually a “house” such as the Idol Mansion in Toronto or “The House” on Canada’s Next Top Model) that is wired for video- and sound-recording equipment to capture interactions between contestants. This living space is a “televisual construct” (Kilborn, 2003, p. 80) that signifies the story world in which the competition unfolds. In Canadian Idol and Canada’s Next Top Model, the house is a grand mansion that extends the connotation of the private luxury associated with the life of stars:

While the Idols were surely enjoying living it up in a swank downtown hotel during the Top 22 phase of the show, it doesn’t compare to the star treatment of the Top 10 and a spot in the exclusive Idol Mansion.

Located in a posh Toronto neighbourhood surrounded by sprawling estates of the rich and famous, the 7-bedroom mansion has enough luxurious features to entertain even the most distractible Idol on a rare free day. That includes an indoor pool, Jacuzzi, two saunas, racquetball/basketball court, home theatre, fitness room, and tennis court. (CTV, 2006a)

The mansions are depicted on program-related websites through photos and descriptions, which invite comments from users of interactive media. The use of a familial environment such as a house amplifies the blurred boundaries between public and private realms and enhances viewer identification with the characters. However, these houses are also voyeuristic settings and thus raise ethical questions about surveillance and the privacy of contestants (Andrejevic, 2004; Dovey, 2000; Glynn, 2000).³

Program-related chatrooms provide additional entry points into the narrative. As a result, interactive media users engage with content in a manner similar to online communities dedicated to soap operas (Baym, 2000). These interactive possibilities create the impression that viewers actually influence narrative pro-
gression and are part of the transformation process of their favourite characters (for example, through voting for a contestant), as well as by encouraging contestants along their journey (in the form of online commentary such as blogs). Producers of Canada’s Next Top Model teamed up with Yahoo Entertainment to make extensive use of viewers’ commentaries, as exemplified by a blog from “Sarah S.” addressed to Andrea, winner of the program’s first season:

Andrea, I think you’re gorgeous and have clearly come a long way in the short time between now and the first day . . . but it’s clear that you’re the one who is going to defeat you! Trash-talking Tricia and getting all hacked off that there are cameras on you 24/7 when you had to know that a television reality show was going to be just like that (and I’m sure your contract said as much) is just immature. Rise above it all and be beautiful in your strength of character! (2006, italics added).

Similarly, the Canadian Idol website dedicates a space for online commentary from contestants, their families, and their friends, exemplified by the entry from the father of Eva Avila, winner of the fourth season:

I see her more confident on stage and I know she’s learning a lot of tricks of the trade. I’ve seen a big change. It feels like she is doing what I wasn’t able to do (as a musician). I never had an opportunity like this growing up. I’m very, very proud. (CTV, 2006; italics added)

This engagement with reality programs’ online communities contributes to a sense of familiarity with the protagonists of the story lines. It furthermore promotes involvement in virtual environments, which emulate closeness to the “stars” of the programs.

In Canadian Idol and Canada’s Next Top Model, the transformation narrative is clearly linked to the celebrity cult, which has grown in recent years due to extensive cross-referencing of star stories in tabloid-style magazines and TV programs. In many reality programs, the “ordinary” individual is transformed into a star or “celetoid” (a term coined by Rojek [2001] to capture their short-lived public recognition), a process that the viewer witnesses and partakes in at key moments. Holmes (2004a) states that “the emphasis on the ordinariness of the contestants contributes to the deliberate blurring between contestant and viewer and, as a result, a potential invocation of the audience’s own aspirations (or fantasies) of success and stardom” (p. 156). Accordingly, Canadian Idol and Canada’s Next Top Model tap into this “success myth,” which, as part of the “American dream,” creates the illusion that in spite of social stratification, anyone can rise above their rank (Dyer, 1998). These programs, in particular, are paradigmatic of the success myth, with their predominant focus on the “innate” talent of contestants, as well as the contestants’ transformation through dedication and professionalism (Holmes, 2004). Within the context of reality TV production, formats such as Idol also epitomize the construction of celebrity to maintain control over a program franchise and to manage financial risks by manufacturing multiple celebrities as vehicles for promotion and online engagement (Turner, 2004).

However, stories of change in reality TV programs are limited to individual transformations associated with processes of consumption, thus foreclosing ideas
about broader social transformations. Furthermore, programs do not address any significant debates in society or highlight particular issues of concern, because they do not have an investigative agenda, but are rather, obsessively concerned with larger-than-life characters, with lively conversational exchanges and with occasional dramatic outbursts which are, however, almost always swiftly and amicably resolved. All docu-soaps have ultimately the same objective: to produce a mildly diverting entertainment more likely to provoke an amused chuckle than to produce new insights into the world and its workings. (Kilborn, 2003, p. 102)

And in spite of increased engagement with reality programs through votes, comments, and blogs, viewer involvement tends to be superficial in its concentration on narrowly defined narratives about personal success, stardom, and consumption.

**A closer look at Canadian Idol**

The story of *Canadian Idol* (Bowlby & Brunton, 2003) is linked inevitably to the development of *American Idol* (Fuller, 2002), which is based on the original U.K. program *Pop Idol* (Fuller, 2001). The *Idol* format is a reality TV contest with the aim of finding a “pop idol” and recording artist by staging nationwide auditions. From the thousands of hopeful applicants, 500 contestants are selected. After more auditions, this number is reduced to 100, then to 50, and finally to 10. The more “interesting” moments in these auditions are broadcast to showcase “broken dreams and shattered egos” (Schmitt, Bisson, & Fey, 2005, p. 147). Each week the public and a group of four judges (or three, in the case of *American Idol*) vote off one contestant—out of the final 10—until the winner is designated “Idol” for that particular television cycle.

The *Idol* format entails elements of universal appeal. It is a family-oriented program that is reminiscent of earlier televised talent contests during the era of broadcasting, such as *The Original Amateur Hour* (Graham, 1948), which aired from 1948 to 1970 (Dederer, 2006), *Star Search*, (Banner & Wagner, 1983), and *Tiny Talent Time* (Lawrence, 1957), which aired from 1957 to 1992 on CHCH Television in Hamilton. However, global franchising and format interactivity have made *Idol* a “business changer for all of network television” (Carter, 2006, p. 194), since it exemplifies how to “maximize ancillary exploitation of a format in order to generate maximum revenue” (Schmitt, Bisson, & Fey, 2005, p. 147).

By 2008, the *Idol* format had been licensed to over 35 countries, including Belgium, Germany, South Africa, Norway, Australia, Russia, Croatia, Serbia and Montenegro, the U.S., Kazakhstan, and Canada (FremantleMedia, 2004; FremantleMedia, 2006; Wikipedia, 2006), as well as India, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Vietnam (FremantleMedia, 2004a; Le, 2004). As is typical of most format sales, FremantleMedia and 19 Entertainment maintain control over the show’s adaptation in local markets. 19 Entertainment also manages the careers of the show’s winners and takes a cut of the profits generated through their concerts and record sales (Hearn, 2004). The *Idol* program has generated high audience ratings in England, the U.S., and Australia (FremantleMedia, 2004b). In Canada, with
almost 3.6 million viewers for the closing section and winner announcement on Canadian Idol in 2003, the format earned one of the highest ratings in Canada’s television history (Edwards, 2003).

According to FremantleMedia’s format “bible,” the Idol franchise contains four essential components:

- A specific “look” in set design and colours, logos, sequence of events, role of host(s) and judges, lighting and camera angles, et cetera;
- Contracting audience members/contestants for the actual TV program;
- Basing the elimination of contestants on telephone votes; and
- Interactive online forums.

Hence, Pop Idol serves as the template for all Idol franchises. In the words of Canadian Idol host Ben Mulroney, “The great thing about a format like Canadian Idol is that it can be adapted to any national context” (Ben Mulroney, host, Canadian Idol, personal communication, Vancouver, BC, April 29, 2004). The Canadian franchise also follows the value-added American Idol template, since the producers “wanted to mirror the American show, because audiences were familiar with it” (Mark Lysakowski, line producer, Insight Production, personal communication, Toronto, ON, April 29, 2004).

In 2002, CTV licensed the format for the Canadian market and hired Toronto’s Insight Production for its local adaptation. During pre-production, Insight producers John Brunton and Mark Lysakowski went to Los Angeles to attend American Idol auditions and to “figure out how it works and to get some pointers on the whole operation” (Mark Lysakowski, line producer, Insight Production, personal communication, Toronto, ON, April 29, 2004). The producers also watched the entire seasons of American Idol and Pop Idol to become familiar with the program and its production matrix. Throughout the first season of Canadian Idol, FremantleMedia remained in close contact with its Canadian co-producers, “because it is in their [FremantleMedia’s] interest that the show does well in Canada and adheres to the format” (Mark Lysakowski, line producer, Insight Production, personal communication, Toronto, ON, April 29, 2004). Consultations via telephone and face-to-face meetings ensured that the format maintained its recognizability while being adapted to Canada’s television culture and viewer sensibilities. FremantleMedia, therefore, checked the rough cuts and premiere tapes of Canadian Idol to make sure that production standards were met (Mark Lysakowski, line producer, Insight Production, personal communication, Toronto, ON, April 29, 2004).

Even though Canadian Idol is a hybrid of Pop Idol and American Idol, its fundamental structure and content follows the original Pop Idol format. According to Lysakowski, Insight Production, the show therefore adheres to the format bible as closely as possible, in addition to

the whole philosophy of a single person coming through a door to audition for a show, to the ultimate winner chosen by the public. It’s the journey that the person takes to become the next Idol, an American, British or whatever—that’s the underlying theme of the show. The basic structure of
the series remains the same. (Mark Lysakowski, line producer, Insight Production, personal communication, Toronto, ON, April 29, 2004)

In some instances, the Canadian producers find the U.K. show to be closer to Canadian sensibilities, while at other times they utilize elements from the value-added American adaptation (Mark Lysakowski, line producer, Insight Production, personal communication, Toronto, ON, April 29, 2004). In contrast to three judges on American Idol, Canadian Idol features four, like Pop Idol and other Idol formats around the world. Also, Simon Cowell’s trademark as the “nasty judge” on Pop Idol and American Idol is copied in Zack Werner in Canada. This “character adaptation” has proven to be more or less successful. Whereas Canadian Idol judge Zack Werner (as quoted in Tilley, 2004) denies ironically that he is anything but himself, Idol judges in other TV markets have drawn criticism for culturally inappropriate behaviour. For example, in Vietnam Idol, the judge was scrutinized by the government for deviating from Communist Party principles of “developing Vietnam’s culture into an advanced culture imbued with national identities” because he criticized a contestant for following “too strict a dress code” (as quoted in Le, 2004).

Idol hosts also share characteristics across format adaptations. Since Pop Idol features two hosts, the first season of American Idol had two presenters (Ryan Seacrest and Brian Dunkelman), which was then copied for the first season of Canadian Idol. In later seasons, producers decided to feature only one host in the North American franchises to keep the focus on contestants and judges. Ben Mulroney comments on his role as an Idol host:

THE PERFECT HOST for Idol should be slightly more interesting than vanilla . . . Fashionable, but not like he’s trying to upstage anyone. Funny, but not necessarily a comedian. Confident, but not necessarily cocky. He should be like a good child: speak when spoken to and recognize his place in the family. This show is first and foremost about the singers, and then about the judges, and maybe if we’re lucky after that, and we have time, it should be about the host. (as quoted in Gillis, 2003; emphasis in the original)

Cultural signifiers, national symbols, and local stories are used throughout the Canadian Idol season to localize and underscore Canadian aspects of the franchise. For example, the program’s opening shots feature ice sculptures in Ottawa and the historic intersection of Main Street and Portage Avenue in Winnipeg; the Canadian flag is prominently displayed on clothing during audition rounds; and the Canadian anthem is sung before and during the auditions and forms part of the televised programs as well (Read, 2004). According to Mulroney,

It’s a fairly rigid system, the way the performance show goes, followed by the telephone vote. Certain types of songs are sung, and the visual look of the show is pretty much universal. But within the rigid system you build in [the capacity] for each country to tell its own stories. We tell unique Canadian stories from a Canadian perspective, and we tell it to a Canadian audience, using Canadian judges, Canadian kids, Canadian audiences and Canadian songs. (Ben Mulroney, host, Canadian Idol, personal communication, Toronto, ON, April 29, 2004)
In order to successfully “glocalize” *Idol*, the producers therefore emphasize certain “Canadianisms,” reflected particularly in stories about contestants and their origins. From the young teacher from Saskatchewan who is voted “most popular” by her high school students to the “hometown hero” (such as Theresa Sokyrka), to the best friends from the Maritimes heading for Toronto, local aspects and culturally familiar stories are intertwined with the *Idol* narrative to create viewer identification with the program’s characters. Yet the Canadian producers also introduce small changes to meet cultural sensibilities and audience preferences:

Working with Fremantle was a very collaborative process. Just like other international brands—like a fast food restaurant or a clothing line—not everything translates internationally. So the people that own the trademark work closely with us. There were some things they wanted us to do, and I said “no, that would not play well in Canada.” (Mark Lysakowski, line producer, Insight Production, personal communication, Toronto, ON, April 29, 2004)

For example, when contestants from *American Idol* made a guest appearance in Canada in 2003, American producers suggested they perform a rendition of “God Bless the U.S.A.” The Canadian producers feared a backlash from Canadian viewers and strongly recommended that the group perform the song “What the World Needs Now Is Love”) instead (Mark Lysakowski, line producer, Insight Production, personal communication, Toronto, ON, April 29, 2004).

All changes in format adaptations are only “cosmetic,” however, and they have to be approved by the licensor, because the fundamental structure of the format cannot be altered:

We do the window dressing, some cosmetic changes, to make the show a little different. In the American show, the national auditions generally only show the worst singers. We show the bad singers, and it gives people a chance to laugh. But we also show the good singers and the interesting human stories, which make people far more interested in our show. (Mark Lysakowski, line producer, Insight Production, personal communication, Toronto, ON, April 29, 2004)

The focus is on the interchangeable aspects of the format, namely, the contestants and their local stories, which differ for every TV season. The recruitment of “semi-professional” performers is an important aspect of reality format production, since it reduces costs and adds interactive elements (for example, through blogs, online chats, and so on). Similarly, the staging of media events and national auditions provide entry points for interactive engagement.

Since *Canadian Idol* airs during the summer months, auditions coincide with the final episodes of *American Idol*, which results in additional cross-promotion for the shows. *Canadian Idol* is produced on a seasonal basis. Thus its success—based on audience ratings and advertising rates—determines future production, as well as employment for local producers and crews (Mark Lysakowski, line producer, Insight Production, personal communication, Toronto, ON, April 29, 2004).
Telus is the official wireless sponsor of Canadian Idol and has been so since 2006. This gives Telus clients access to wireless content, as well as the ability to vote by text message. The service provides Idol news, video footage, ring-tones, and voice-tones of the competitors. Clients also have access to biographies and images of the host and judging panel (Telus & CTV, 2006). In 2006, Telus also partnered with Samsung to provide Idol finalists with a new Samsung A950 cell-phone as a cross-promotional strategy. Similar to other Idol programs, the winner signs a recording contract—in the case of Canadian Idol, with Sony BMG Canada—and releases a debut album in the months following the show’s finale.

In addition to entering a recording contract with a local subsidiary of the Bertelsmann Music Group (or a nominee of 19 Recordings), finalists also have to sign agreements with a management company and promote merchandise from sponsors associated with the format. All proceeds from merchandizing and sponsorship arrangements in the U.K. and the U.S. are retained by 19 Entertainment; in Canada, a 50/50 split between 19 Entertainment and FremantleMedia applies. Finalists are contractually obliged to keep all aspects of the program and the series strictly confidential.

Overall, Canadian Idol is an adaptation that resembles the U.K. version closely, juxtaposed with Canadian stories and overtones from the American version. The glocalization of this reality format is achieved through extensive cross-promotion and insertion of local stories, and as well as by skilfully embedding the production into local communities through media events (such as the finale and nationwide auditions). By tapping into the matrix of familiar national and cultural symbols, Idol achieves a proximity to viewers that heightens their potential for identification and engagement with characters on the program, as well as with the consumer products associated with the show.

**Staging Idol auditions**

Audience interactivity with program content extends the traditional “lean back” experience of television viewing into a more active “lean forward” activity through computer technology. According to Murray (1997), audiences now tend to progress through several stages: first, they move through sequential activities (e.g., watching a program, then interacting with content online); next, they engage in simultaneous interactivity with two media (audience members interact online while watching the program on television); and finally, interactive users engage in a merged experience, watching and interacting in the same medium. Even though the possibilities for interactive narratives and “imaginative engagement” appear endless, the political economy of television and the Internet determines the parameters and extent to which audience members can express themselves in interactive domains. As Murray (2000) rightly points out, “there is a distinction between playing an active role within an authored environment and having authorship of the environment itself” (p. 152). In most cases, media participation and interactivity therefore take place within pre-established frameworks determined by producers and website developers, which delimit the degree of audience engagement to a pre-determined spectrum of choices.

In addition to offering opportunities for online interactivity, reality TV producers source many contestants and semi-professional performers from an audi-
ence pool at auditions staged across the country. These auditions are advertised in print media, as well as on television, radio, and websites, and they promise young recruits a slice of the “American dream,” as highlighted below in CTV’s promotional strategy. In the case of Canadian Idol, the format bible stipulates the selection of two groups: those with good singing voices and on-air presence, and those who can easily be ridiculed for the “humour” portion of the program. Producer John Brunton comments on auditions held in Ottawa during the 2004 season:

There’s 1,600 or 1,700 kids out there lining up and I will show the Canadian public what we’ve seen. . . . I can’t necessarily tell you what that’s going to be right now or what that mix will be or if we’ll have as many eccentric singers coming back . . . There’s an element of cinéma vérité [sic] in this experience. . . . There’s a certain awe and lack of self-awareness that is entertaining. (quoted in Cheadle, 2004)

Regional producer Cousineau adds, “We are making a reality TV show and we want to show a range. People are either very good or good for TV, those in the middle don’t make it” (as quoted in Winwood, 2004). The growing importance of casting agents in reality TV genres is therefore based on finding the right amateurs, who can be exploited for dramatic situations, comedy, and talent, as well as for the “star” transformation described above.

The ridicule of contestants is part of the original concept of Idol and, according to Cowell, is in rebellion against “the terrible political correctness that invaded America and England” (quoted in Carter, 2006, p. 189). However, this objective is not part of the open promotional strategy of Idol, which, on the contrary, fuels the hopes and dreams of applicants in recruitment statements such as the following:

[E]nrich and develop a greater understanding for music and the music business . . . [M]eet music industry players and professionals . . . Meet fans who swarm outside every studio screaming for your autograph . . . Make numerous public appearances in front of thousands of adoring fans. (CTV, 2006c)

Contestants have to be between 16 and 28 years of age, representative of the target demographic of the program. As part of the auditioning process, contestants sign a release form, by which they waive copyright to their performance, moral rights, and integrity rights, as well as personality and privacy rights (CTV, 2006a). Contestants sign their rights to their audition, performance, and program contribution over to the producers, who are entitled to exploit (and license others to use and exploit) such contributions in all media and formats (CTV, 2006a). In addition, producers set the framework for online interactivity with the following stipulation:

As part of Competitors’ contribution to the Program, the Producer may request Competitors to participate in additional activities relating to the Program including without limitation web-casts, pod-casts, blogs, video diaries, chat rooms, SMS chats, as well as various interviews, appearances, promotional, publicity, sponsorship and merchandising activities in any and all media. (CTV, 2006b)
As a result, each contestant has to relate personal experiences through blogs on the show’s website. Similarly to *Top Model*, the program also invites viewers to respond and comment via the *Idol* chatroom.

A study about public participation in television programming in the U.K. reveals that producers generally seek informed consent from participants, but that “[production] pressures will almost inevitably result in some producers behaving less honourably than they should with contributors” (Hibberd, Kilborn, McNair, Marriott, & Schlesinger, 2000, p. 67). The authors of the study recognize that public participation in reality programs is an important industry strategy for reducing production costs, even though participants may suffer the consequences of on-air ridicule for years to come. They recommend stringent guidelines for contracting “semi-professional” on-air personalities and propose that informed consent should be based on participants’ understanding of a program’s format, objectives, and aims. This is especially important considering the age group that *Idol* targets for recruitment. Questions about ethics are also relevant in light of recent revelations that participants in programs such as *Paradise Hotel* (Ringbakk, 2003), *Real World* (Murray & Bunim, 1992), and *Joe Millionaire* (Cowan & Michenaud, 2003) are frequently provided with free alcohol to manipulate the story plot for comedic effect (Fletcher, 2006).

To summarize, audience interactivity and viewer participation need to be placed within the context of reality TV production processes. In particular, the staging of media events in the form of auditions highlights how the genres have shifted the focus to audience members as a cheap labour pool for program development. Indeed in 2007, over 50 casting calls for semi-professional performers could be accessed on Internet sites such as jobsearch.about.com. The sites also advise on how to audition for reality TV shows on all the major networks, such as NBC, CBS, FOX, ABC, and MTV, as well as smaller ones such as CW, BRAVO, SciFi, TLC, VH1, HGTV, and the Food Network (Reality TV World, 2007).

As discussed, stringent contractual agreements curtail audience participation in reality formats such as *Idol*. Consequently, the notion that reality TV programs are “fostering interactive participation in social spaces, releasing everyday voices into the public sphere and challenging established paternalism” (quoted in Dovey, 2000, pp. 83-84) has to be reviewed in light of a specific production context that has a significant impact on content development and program (inter)activities. As this analysis has shown, interactivity is built into reality formats intentionally to increase profit margins through text messaging, enhanced character identification, and immersion in virtual communities (as in the case of *Canadian Idol*’s online chatrooms), in which commercial products are often key in resolving the narrative arc. Format producers also extract “work” in the form of viewer creativity from their interactive engagement with media texts. Voting, texting, blogs, actual program participation, and so on augment the overall program format package and allow producers to sell the value-added product to additional markets for higher profits. And finally, the recruitment of semi-professional performers to “star” in reality formats is reflective of the production mandate: to maximize profits by minimizing labour protection.
Summary and conclusion

Reality TV programs are characterized by their hybridized genres, which range from game-docs and soap-docs to variety contests. Placed within their production context of format franchising, franchises such as the Idol programs reveal how concepts are licensed for international markets and adapted to local audience preferences. These “glocalization” processes are based on collaboration between the owners of the program, the licensee, and the contracted production crew, who customize the program for local markets under the supervision of the original producers. In the case of Canadian Idol, the combination of the U.K. and U.S. versions results in a glocalized franchise with the addition of Canadian “stories of change,” contestants, and cultural references. The Canadian format therefore works primarily through references to and depictions of “local stories”—represented through contestants’ performances and online blogs—national symbols, and cultural signifiers, which are superimposed onto the original template of the show. As discussed, these include using opening shots of historic Canadian sites, performing the national anthem as part of televised auditions, and staging media events, as well as a variety of online interactive elements.

A key difference between reality formats and many other television programs is their “built-in” cross-platform accessibility, which allows for enhanced audience interactivity, on the one hand, and additional revenue streams for producers, on the other. This audience interactivity follows pre-established modes through phone and/or text voting, which generates revenues for participating sponsors such as Cingular in the U.S. and Bell Globemedia and Telus (for mobile phone content) in Canada. Online interactivity in the form of blogs and comments is rapidly becoming standardized across international markets, as are Web stores for wallpaper, ring-tones, and Idol clothing (t-shirts, hats, et cetera). Due to its international success, Idol has become a prototype for the global format trade, especially where game-docs and talent shows are concerned. The popularity of Idol is also linked to its genre, the game-doc and talent contest, which appeals to interactive users familiar with peer-to-peer networks for exchanging music and with commentary in the form of blogs. Tie-ins to these formats are sponsors and advertisers, who migrate with the program’s narratives across multiple platforms.

Reality TV programs emerged in response to changing industry conditions in the 1990s. Technological convergence, multichannel television, and increased competition provided the backdrop for an increase in reality format franchising. In addition, successful formats such as Idol set the bar for a new kind of program development, starting with the recruitment of voluntary participants. The continuing practice of sourcing semi-professionals from an audience pool is linked clearly to reducing program development costs, as well as to circumventing labour standards and union contracts. Yet the stringent contractual conditions under which contestants labour for format producers are not commonly known. On the contrary, “stories of transformation” and “success myths” distort this aspect of reality TV, amplified by the fact that contestants are obliged contractually not to disclose details of their experiences on the shows.

In analyzing a reality format such as Idol, it is important to understand the production processes that underlie the adaptation of an international franchise and
its narrative development. Many of the key elements are standardized to ensure the successful glocalization of a format. From the basic concept to characters, the role of hosts, logos, sponsors, media events, website layout, and interactive components, licensors (such as FremantleMedia) stipulate the degree to which a format can be adapted to a new market, yet remain recognizable as an international brand. As a result, reality TV formats reflect a new stage in the globalization of television, which is not defined primarily by programming flows, but by the trade of intellectual property and expertise. The fact that a program such as Canadian Idol is referred to as a “local program” by representatives from organizations as diverse as Our Public Airwaves (2006) and PricewaterhouseCoopers (2006) highlights the importance of creating greater awareness of reality TV production processes and labour relations on production sets, as well as the broader context of the international format franchising trade.

Notes
1. According to Robertson (1992), “glocalization” relates to the creation of niche markets for globally distributed products and programs. It therefore represents the extension of international trade, economic networks, and labour.

2. Canada’s Next Top Model (Manuel, 2006, is based on America’s Next Top Model (Banks & Mok, 2004). The U.S. has been lagging behind the U.K. in international format development, but is gaining recognition through formats such as Top Model, which has been adapted to 14 international markets. The Canadian format is produced by Temple Street Productions and airs on Citytv/CHUM and on the Living Channel in the U.K.

3. This is especially the case with Big Brother in the U.K, where Web cam footage is transmitted over the Internet 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

4. Most contestants on reality TV programs are contractually obliged to engage with viewers and interactive users online through blogs, chatrooms, video diaries, SMS chats, and podcasts.

5. American Idol’s worth as a television franchise is estimated at U.S.$2.5 billion. It generates U.S.$500 million in TV advertising revenues, in addition to US$30 to 50 million in sponsorship deals (International Format Lawyers Association [IFLA], 2007).

6. The “bible” contains the “building blocks” for a reality format (plot; sample scripts; role of characters, contestants, and judges; camera and editing work; visual graphics; audience interactivity, et cetera) that ensure “recognizability” and limited copyright with format producers, but at the same time provide “adaptability” to localize a global concept to fit culturally defined audience preferences.

7. Contestants on America’s Next Top Model have also been shown inebriated. In addition, the application for Canada’s Next Top Model includes a questionnaire with questions such as “How do you act when you get drunk? . . . Do you get quiet, or are you wild?” (Citytv, 2006a).

8. Canadian Idol has also been placed in the same category as home-grown Canadian programs such as Corner Gas (Butt & Storey, 2004), DaVinci’s Inquest (Haddock, 1998), and the Royal Canadian Airfarce (Rosemond, 1993).

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