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**At the origin of a global industry:  
The TV format trade as an Anglo-American invention**

**Introduction: A revolution 50 years in the making**

Traditionally, international TV trade flows have been dominated by finished programmes, such as films and TV series, much of it produced in Hollywood. However, the ‘format revolution’ radically changed the nature of these flows when, in the late 1990s, concepts adapted from territory to territory began to cross borders in great numbers. Four formats played a prominent role in this revolution, namely *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?*, *Survivor*, *Big Brother* and *Idols*. They were identified as the first ‘super-formats’ not just because of the quantity of local adaptations and the speed at which they traveled around the world, but because they alerted broadcasters to the untapped potential of the TV format (Bazalgette 2005).

A format can be defined as ‘a show that can generate a distinctive narrative and is licensed outside its country of origin in order to be adapted to local audiences’ (Chalaby 2011; see also Moran 2006: 20). In an age of fierce competition, they enable broadcasters to offer local programming – always the audience favourite – whilst managing risk (with the knowledge that the same concept has a proven track record in other markets) and driving down costs (through the progressive refinement of the production model). No wonder that the format trade is today a thriving global industry worth an estimated €3.1 billion per

year (FRAPA 2009: 17). Between 2006 and 2008, 445 formats led to 1262 adaptations in 57 territories (ibid: 11). Most popular shows these days are formatted and they cover all TV genres from daytime cookery and decorating shows to prime time talent competition blockbusters.

This article's focus is not the super-formats (see Bazalgette 2005; Chalaby 2011; Esser 2010) but the evolution that explains their emergence in the late 1990s. It traces the origins of the trade, uncovers the world's first deals and identifies the first TV formats that aired in the UK, France, Spain and Italy. It shows that the two key principles of the TV format trade were established by the early 1950s, namely, that a format is a *licensed* adaptation based on the intangible property rights attached to a show that a broadcaster acquires and produces when the show's track record demonstrates that it is a *ratings winner*. This article also argues that the TV format trade is an Anglo-American invention because the first format licences of US shows were acquired by British broadcasters.

The second part argues that although the emergence of the first global TV formats in the 1980s were key moments in the history of the format trade, the truly pivotal decade was the 1990s. It is the time when the forces that unleashed the super-formats gathered strength, when the format trade expanded beyond game shows and embraced emerging genres that have since become the bedrock of the TV industry, when British TV production companies emerged as leading format creators and producers, and when the world's two format powerhouses were formed. This article draws from a variety of sources, including broadcasters' written archives and interviews with past TV executives.

### **The world's first TV format agreements**

Cross-border adaptations began in sound broadcasting and the first imitations of US shows appeared on the BBC in the late 1920s and on Australian commercial radio stations in the following decade (Camporesi 2000: 92; Griffen-Foley 2009: 212). They were also present in several Commonwealth countries, particularly Canada. An early favourite seems to have been Major Bowes's *Amateur Hour*, a talent show that first aired in New York in 1934 and was adapted by the BBC in 1936 and four years later by a commercial station in Australia (Camporesi 2000: 119-120; Griffen-Foley 2009: 260). The BBC also adapted an NBC spelling contest, *Spelling Bees*, in 1937 (Camporesi 2000: 121). Whilst it has been established that Australian stations purchased the scripts of the American dramas they were adapting (Griffen-Foley 2009: 212-6), it is unlikely that format licences were acquired when ideas were borrowed from America in genres such as light entertainment.

The world's first format to air on television (albeit only once) was most certainly a comedy panel show called *It Pays to Be Ignorant*, which debuted on WOR New York in June 1942 and later moved to the CBS radio network (Buxton and Owen, 1972: 154). The show came to the attention of Michael Standing, the BBC Light Programme's head of variety, who insisted colleagues listen to a recording. They agreed that it was 'hilariously funny' and decided to purchase the UK rights from Maurice Winnick, a Manchester-born bandleader who represented in the UK the interests of some American radio and TV producers.<sup>1</sup>

The BBC re-titled the show *Ignorance Is Bliss* and paid Sid Colin 40 guineas per programme to adapt the American scripts. It first aired on 22 July 1946 on the

Light Programme and went on to be a notable success. Several series were re-commissioned and the programme stayed on air until 1953.<sup>2</sup> A one-off television broadcast took place on 24 April 1947 that aired live from the Paris Cinema, in central London.<sup>3</sup>

This was followed by *Twenty Questions*, a quiz show based on the parlour game that required a five-strong panel to guess the identity of an object in up to twenty questions. The show premiered on the Mutual radio network in February 1946 and on American television (NBC) in November 1949 (Buxton and Owen, 1972: 314-5; Schwartz et al, 1999: 239). It crossed the Atlantic as a radio show debuting on the BBC on 26 February 1947, Winnick holding the UK rights again. The show proved very popular, attracting up to 9 million listeners, and was re-commissioned for several series.<sup>4</sup> In 1950 the show was translated and broadcast on the Polish and Pakistani services. However, despite interest from the BBC's Television Service in 1951 and 1954, *Twenty Questions* never made it to the TV screen because of a dispute with Winnick over rights (see below).<sup>5</sup>

*What's My Line?* was the first format to cross borders as a TV show. It began on 2 February 1950 on the CBS network and required four panellists to guess a guest's occupation, who answered with either yes or no (Schwartz et al, 1999: 246). *What's My Line?*, created by Bob Bach and produced by Mark Goodson, became exceptionally popular and ran for no less than 17 years in the USA (ibid). The show reached the BBC via Maurice Winnick, where it debuted on 16 July 1951.<sup>6</sup> *What's My Line?* proved equally popular with a British audience and the BBC re-commissioned on average two 13-episode series per year until 1963.<sup>7</sup> It got another run on BBC 2 between August 1973 and May 1974, and was revived

by Thames Television for ITV between March 1984 and August 1990.<sup>8</sup>

The fourth American show adapted by the BBC was *This is Your Life*, which debuted on the NBC radio network in 1948. Two ingredients helped to make it a hit: the guest was kept in the dark as long as possible and his or her former colleagues, close friends and relatives were invited along for the surprise (Buxton and Owen, 1972: 306-7). Within two months of the idea being floated by Ronald Waldman, a licence agreement was signed between the BBC and MCA, the rights holder. The show debuted in August 1955, beginning a nine-year first run.<sup>9</sup>

### **Inventing format rights**

The BBC archives reveal diverging views and some sharp exchanges between the corporation's executives, Maurice Winnick and American rights holders. The sticking point was much less about fees than rights. For the BBC, the idea that something as intangible as the concept of a show could be copyrighted and thus legitimate a fee for duplication was hard to fathom at first.

The issue first arose with *Ignorance Is Bliss*. The American original was heavily scripted and even though Colin scantily referred to these scripts the BBC was comfortable with the idea of paying for them. However, the corporation was opposed to paying a licence fee for the programme itself, which would have been paramount to admitting that it was broadcasting the show under licence. In December 1948, Michael Standing wrote to Winnick in order to remove any ambiguity about the nature of the payments the latter was receiving: 'We should continue to look to you to provide the basic American script for each programme, and it would be for that specific purpose that the fee would be paid.'<sup>10</sup> Winnick

did not pursue the matter because he was unsure about the issue himself and his preoccupation lay primarily with securing a booking for his band to play on the radio programme and subsequent road show.<sup>11</sup>

The issue became more pressing with *Twenty Questions*. As before, the BBC was willing to pay a fee as long as it was not akin to a royalty payment. As no script was involved with this particular show, G.D.G. Perkins, the BBC's Assistant Director of Legal Department, wrote to Winnick in March 1947 that his fee would be 'for his enterprise and labour in obtaining the American recording and bringing it to the Corporation'.<sup>12</sup> Eight months later, Perkins stated that he was 'quite certain that there is no copyright recognised either by English or American law in the title, idea, plan, or form of this programme', and enclosed a £150 cheque 'for [...] services in bringing us the idea of this programme in a form suitable for broadcasting'.<sup>13</sup>

This time, the BBC met with fierce opposition. First, as reported by L. Wellington, the Home Service Controller, the American format owner was unhappy about not receiving a fee. In his note, Wellington elaborated: 'the owner considers that his copyright does exist – not in the idea, but in the format, i.e. the ghost voice, quickies, etc.'<sup>14</sup> The BBC's New York attorney, Bernard Smith, concurred with this view and advised the corporation to proceed cautiously because the format owner could predicate a lawsuit on four grounds, including unfair competition and copyright infringement. He warned the BBC:

In several recent cases where negotiations took place in New York, the Courts of this State have recognized the right to recover compensation for the



submission of a “combination of ideas expressed in a concrete formula original” with the author and entrusted to a third party for sale. [...]

Mere ideas also cannot be the subject of copyright. However, a person’s particular method or expression of portrayal is the subject of copyright, and cannot be copied or plagiarized. Thus, it has been held that there may be literary piracy without actual use of the dialogue.<sup>15</sup>

However, the BBC chose to maintain the Perkins line whilst settling its dispute with Winnick in January 1949. The agreement made no mention of copyright but included a £1,000 payment in order to settle all claims related to the ‘sound broadcasts’ of *Twenty Questions* in the UK.<sup>16</sup> The unresolved issue of rights prevented the show’s transfer to television, and when Ronald Waldman began planning a weekly TV version, he was told that this would be impossible because the BBC ‘did not admit that there was any TV rights attached to the programme’.<sup>17</sup>

It was on the third programme, *What’s My Line?*, that the BBC and Winnick broke new ground. The corporation signed a licensing agreement with Winnick soon after it had expressed an interest in the show. The contract was signed on 29 June 1951, before the programme’s first broadcast. Its opening clause stipulated the purpose of the fee:

I [Maurice Winnick] grant the B.B.C. the right for 26 single performances on television in the British Isles only for a fee of £300.0.0. (Three Hundred

pounds). Television performances are scheduled to commence on or about the third or fourth week of July 1951.<sup>18</sup>

The UK TV rights being established, the fifth clause listed the other rights attached to the property:

It is agreed that all other rights in the feature entitled “What’s My Line” in the form supplied by me [Maurice Winnick] including, but not limiting them, film rights [...], stage rights, sound broadcasting rights, foreign rights, and translation rights and the rights of publication are reserved to me.<sup>19</sup>

This contract establishes the legal foundations of the TV format industry and must be considered its birth certificate. For the first time, a broadcaster agreed to pay for a show’s idea and package – its format – as opposed to something tangible such as scripts. The document pins down the notion of the format as the right to remake a programme for a given territory that exists alongside other rights that are attached to a given intellectual property.<sup>20</sup> Since these rights can be traded, this led to the formation of a rights market, and the international format trade grew on the back of the market established by these format rights.

Those early deals also reveal the commercial engine that propels the format business. BBC executives had no blueprint to work with and at times showed their frustration having to negotiate for rights that they were not certain existed in the first place. But they stuck with negotiations on the basis that these shows had been ratings hits in their home market. They even agreed to pay inflated fees once they

knew that *What's My Line?* was a 'winner' with the audience.<sup>21</sup> More than 60 years later, the principle remains the same. The format trade has become a multi-billion dollar industry because broadcasters feel reassured in acquiring shows that come with a proof of concept and established track record. No format offers a guarantee of success but they enable broadcasters to manage risk.

### **ITV: An early boon for the fledgling format trade**

The launch of ITV, the UK's first commercial network, on Thursday 22 September 1955 presented the fledgling format trade with a boon. Within its first week on air, ITV aired five formats.

Three were game shows: *Take Your Pick*, *Double Your Money* and *Beat the Clock*. The first two were brought by their respective presenters, Michael Miles and Hughie Green, from Radio Luxembourg (although both programmes were clearly based on US game shows), and the third was a Goodson-Todman quiz show that had debuted five years earlier on CBS. The fourth format was *People are Funny*, a comedy stunt programme based on audience participation. Rapidly 'condemned as cruel, tasteless and pointless' (Sendall, 1982: 321), it also came from America, where it debuted on the radio network NBC in April 1942 before starting a television run in September 1954 (Buxton and Owen, 1972: 238; McNeil, 1997: 649; Sendall, 1982: 319-23; Schwartz et al., 1999: 14-17).

The fifth show was a talent-spotting competition called *Chance of a Lifetime*. Winnick had offered the format to the BBC four years earlier, before it premiered on ABC in May 1952, but Ronald Waldman, the BBC's Head of Light Entertainment turned it down.<sup>22</sup> He professed to liking another show but in truth

the BBC was already well served in the genre with *Opportunity Knocks*, a talent discovery show that premiered on the Light Programme on 18 February 1949.<sup>23</sup>

The commercial network aired at least seven other formats before the decade was out, four of them debuting in 1956. *The Sixty-Four Thousand [shillings] Question*, which premiered in May 1956, was based on the popular *The \$64,000 Question*. The show had been airing on CBS for 11 months and was the first American ‘big-money’ quiz show. *Do You Trust Your Wife?*, which involved married couples, was derived from a CBS show of the same name, and *Spot the Tune* came from *Name That Tune*, a phenomenally popular musical quiz show devised by Ralph Edwards that started a long career on US TV in July 1953. *Two for the Money* was produced by Associated-Rediffusion and was first aired in August 1956. It was a Godson-Todman creation that first went on air on NBC in September 1952 (Schwartz et al, 1999: 57, 148-9, 201-2, 239; Sendall, 1982: 348-9).<sup>24</sup>

The following year, *Criss Cross Quiz*, which was produced by Granada, debuted in June for a ten-year run.<sup>25</sup> It was adapted from a hugely successful Barry and Enright show called *Tic-Tac-Dough* which first came on air on NBC in July 1956 (Schwartz et al, 1999: 225-7). Then, in July 1958, *Twenty-One* started a six-month run. The US version of the same name, also devised by Barry and Enright, had premiered on NBC in September 1956 but the US network abruptly took it off air two years later amid fixing allegations that led to a congressional investigation (and, much later, a Robert Redford movie) (Boddy 1993: 218-21; Graham 1988: 23-34; Schwartz et al, 1999: 237-9). Granada’s British version was not above suspicion and allegations were made that some participants were given

‘advance knowledge of the questions’ (Paulu 1961: 138). Finally, *Dotto* began a 19-month run in September 1958. It was based on an American show of the same name that first aired in January 1958 on CBS and that also got caught up in the scandals (Graham 1988: 29-31; Paulu 1961: 138; Schwartz et al 1999: 59).<sup>26</sup>

ITV did not acquire another format for four years, despite the immense popularity of quiz shows (Black 1972: 111-13).<sup>27</sup> Not only was the network forced to approach with caution following the whiff of scandal, it was also accused of ‘exploiting the indolence of popular taste’ (ibid: 164). It had no alternative but to try and assuage the Independent Television Authority and all those who were planning to ‘improv[e] public taste by legislation’ (ibid: 168).

### **The TV format trade as an Anglo-American invention**

Considering trade practices in markets beyond America and Britain, it can be established that the TV format was an Anglo-American invention. As seen above, the BBC, Maurice Winnick and the US rights holders established that for a TV show to become a format, a licence needs to be purchased. And ITV also acquired the UK rights of their formats (see, for example, Forman 1997: 91). There is evidence that this was not common practice elsewhere until the 1980s. As widely acknowledged, American television was extremely influential in the 1950s (Bourdon 2001; Grasso 2004), but when overseas broadcasters turned to US TV networks for inspiration they simply stole their ideas.

For instance, in 1957, a few months after its TV channel had come on air, the Swedish public service broadcaster adapted *Double or Nothing* (*10.000 kronor – kvitt eller dubbelt*). Following its immense success, Sveriges Radio sent a

representative to the USA with the task of monitoring the US networks (Bjork 2009: 221). He ‘referred to his activities as ‘spy work’’ (ibid.) and a few years later when he wrote to draw attention to a popular programme, he was told that ‘it was better to ‘steal the idea and do a show of that kind ourselves’’ and, according to Bjork, ‘the phrase ‘stealing’ appeared in several other Hamberg [Sveriges Radio’s entertainment executive] letters as well’. (ibid.)

Similar practices were common in other territories. In France, early sound broadcasting adaptations include local versions of *Double or Nothing*, *Queen for a Day*, and *Twenty-One* that aired either on Radiodiffusion et Télévision Française (RTF) or Radio-Luxembourg in the 1950s (Schmitt 2005: 108). The first TV adaptations seem to be *Jouons le jeu* (RTF, 1951-1952) (*What’s My Line?*), and *Oui ou Non* (RTF, 1955-56), an adaptation of Radio-Luxembourg’s sound broadcast version of *Twenty-One* (Leveneur 2009: 37). The only show for which a French licence was acquired was Radio-Luxembourg’s *Reine d’un jour* (*Queen for a Day*) – the exception that proves the rule (Merlin 1966: 213-25).<sup>28</sup>

A few years later the RTF adapted an Italian game show called *Campanile Sera*, which consisted of two village teams competing in various outdoor games of dexterity and endurance. *Intervilles*, which debuted in 1962, remained intermittently on air for the rest of the century and became one of RTF’s most iconic programmes (Leveneur, 2009: 37, 39, 59).

Over the next two decades, the French state broadcaster adapted far fewer shows because its two channels aired only in the evening, removing the need for daytime programming (Jost, 2005: 15-16). The broadcaster was also protected by a state monopoly and therefore was under no pressure to boost its ratings with

light entertainment. Finally, part of RTF's remit was to develop the country's TV production capacity, thus there was only one format among the 151 game shows aired between 1951 and 1979 (Leveneur, 2005).<sup>29</sup>

In Italy, RAI adapted four game shows in the 1950s. *Duecento al secondo* (from the US version of *Dollar a Second*) premiered in June 1955 and stayed on air for the summer (Grasso, 2004: 34-5; Schwartz et al, 1999: 58). Five months later this was followed by *Lascia o raddoppia?*, a quiz show based on *Double or Nothing* that was re-commissioned for many years and became a cultural phenomenon (ibid: 43-50). *Telematch*, based on a French game show of the same name, debuted in January 1957, and by the end of the year RAI got another hit with *Il Musichiere*, an adaptation of *Name That Tune* (a Ralph Edwards creation that premiered on NBC in July 1953), which went through 90 episodes in three years (ibid: 53, 59-60; Schwartz et al, 1999: 148).

In Spain, TVE, the public TV channel, began broadcasting in 1956, aired its first quiz shows the following year, most of them 'inspired' by US TV shows (Lacalle, 2001: 53-4; author's translation). *Adivine su vida* (*What's My Line?*) in 1957 was followed by *X-O da dinero* (*Tic-Tac Dough*) in 1959, *Esta es su vida* (*This Is Your Life*) in 1962, *La unión hace la fuerza* (combining RAI's *Campanile Sera* and RTF's *La Tête et les jambes*) in 1964, and *Reina por un día* (*Queen for a Day*) the same year (Baget Herms 1993: 61-148). And, the solo French exception aside, none of them licensed.

Outside Europe, the first formats reached Australia in the late 1950s, where a commercial TV system developed early (Moran 1998). However, as elsewhere, borrowings were rarely acknowledged at first (Fox 2010). The problem was

identical in Latin America where Mark Goodson complained that he ‘has had trouble with [...] stations pirating ideas under slight disguise’.<sup>30</sup>

### **Format pioneers and the 1978 Goodson Worldwide Agreement**

American television may have been influential but the format trade developed slowly and only a couple of distributors were involved in the business until the late 1970s. Paul Talbot established Fremantle Corporation in 1952 and his company pioneered the international sale of American TV programmes. Whilst this remained his business staple he also helped to develop franchising when he began selling locally adapted shows. The first such franchise was *Romper Room*, a programme for preschoolers that was first adapted in various US local TV markets before Talbot acquired the show’s international rights (Moran 2006: 22-3). By the end of the 1960s, 25 local versions were in production around the world (Guider 2005; Miller 2005).

The breakthrough - both for Fremantle and the international format trade - came later in 1978, when Talbot obtained the representation of the complete Goodson-Todman catalogue, first for the UK and then for Europe and the Middle East (Usdan, interview 2010a). This agreement helped take the format trade to a whole new level by enabling a wider and *lawful* international distribution. Marc Goodson was America’s most prolific game show creator and, as seen above, several of his creations had already travelled to Europe including *What’s My Line?*, *Beat the Clock* and *Two for the Money*. In addition, *Play Your Hunch* started a six-month run on the BBC in April 1961, and *Call My Bluff* began a 23-year run on BBC2 in October 1965.<sup>31</sup> However, the 1978 deal brought in many



more Mark Goodson shows and soon there were 40 on air across Europe. Some markets took a few (the most popular was *The Price is Right*) and the UK took the most. They include *I've Got a Secret* (first aired in the USA in 1952), *The Price is Right* (1956), *To Tell the Truth* (1956), *Concentration* (1958), *Password* (1961), *The Match Game* (1962), *Family Feud* (1976), *Now You See It* (1974), *Showoffs* (1975), *The Better Sex* (1977), *Card Sharks* (1978), *Blockbusters* (1980) and *Child's Play* (1982) (Usdan, email communication 2010b). Many of these TV shows were among Europe's most popular of the closing decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In Britain for instance, *The Match Game* (*Blankety Blank*, January 1979, BBC1), and *Card Sharks* (*Play Your Cards Right*, February 1980, ITV), were both immensely popular, while *Blockbusters* famously had a cult following, *The Price is Right* aired on and off until 2007, and *Family Feud* was still on the ITV schedule in spring 2011, as *Family Fortunes* (Usdan, email communication 2010b).

Talbot Television - as Fremantle's international division was called - took on the representation of several other American game show producers, notably Chuck Barris (*The Dating Game*, *The Newlywed Game*), Bob Stewart (*The \$10,000 Pyramid*), and Monty Hall (*Let's Make a Deal*) (Hearsey, interview 2010). Talbot Television also produced two Merv Griffin creations, *Jeopardy!* and *The Wheel of Fortune* in some territories, alongside King World International, which by 1983 held the most licences worldwide (ibid; Moran 1998: 31-2; Moran 2006: 97-8). This made Fremantle the world's largest producer of game shows and it was estimated that in the 1980s the company produced or distributed around half the game shows on air worldwide (Gibson 1997; Miller 2005).

Reg Grundy first adapted American game shows for Australian television in the late 1950s (Moran 1998: 42) and as noted above, question marks remain about the acquisition of licences in the early years. Grundy eventually signed an agreement to produce Goodson shows in Australia and came back to the American producer to negotiate a deal for the rest of the world in the late 1970s. Goodson did not want one person representing all his formats and took this opportunity to split his worldwide rights, giving the Australian businessman the rights to his shows outside Europe and the Middle East (Usdan, email communication 2010b). Grundy Worldwide developed internationally on the back of this deal, progressively building its own catalogue (Moran 1998: 55-71).

The first format trading companies emerged in Europe in the late 1970s. In the UK, Jeremy Fox founded Action Time in 1979, and adapted US formats for the British market in large numbers (Chalaby 2011). In Holland, two companies became active in the format trade in the 1980s, Joop van den Ende's JE Entertainment and John de Mol Productions (Chalaby 2011; Fuller 1993; Moran 1998: 33-7).

### **The 1980s: The end of an era**

The 1978 Goodson worldwide agreement and subsequent deals between US game show producers and Fremantle and Grundy formed the core of the first wave of international formats post-1950. Among those mentioned above, *The Wheel of Fortune* became the most widely adapted show of the 1980s, breaking a record with 23 local productions, followed by *The Price is Right* (approx. 12), *The Dating Game*, *Family Feud* and *Jeopardy* (Copper-Chen, 1994: 146). Their

impact on local TV markets was significant. In Italy, for instance, *The Price is Right* (*OK il prezzo è giusto*) arrived in 1983, followed by *The Dating Game* (*Il gioco delle copie*) and *Blockbusters* (*Doppio Slalom*) in 1985, *The Newlywed Game* (*Tra moglie e marito*) in 1987, *Hollywood Squares* (*Il gioco dei nove*) and *Family Feud* (*Cari genitori*) in 1987, and *The Wheel of Fortune* in 1989 (*La ruota della fortuna*) (Grasso, 2004: 400,430, 465-6, 486, 497-9). France adapted *The Dating Game* in 1985, *The Price is Right*, *The Wheel of Fortune* and *The Newlywed Game* in 1987, *Jeopardy* in 1989, and *Family Feud* in 1990 (Leveneur, 2009: 59; Copper-Chen, 1994: 272-3). As for the UK, the BBC and especially ITV adapted countless US game shows throughout the 1980s, as seen above. In 1990, all 14 formats on air came from America, with the exception of the German *Wetten Das* (*You Bet*) (Copper-Chen, 1994: 271-2).

It is tempting to interpret the 1980s as the dawn of a global age in the format industry but it is probably more accurate to see it as the end of a seminal period. It was a time when the trade was essentially restricted to a single genre – the game show – and when at least three quarters of formats originated in the United States.<sup>32</sup> It was also a time when relatively few shows were formatted and only a handful of companies distributed them. Above all, formats did not have the allure they have gained today. Game shows were a minor daytime genre of which no one took notice and which lacked the glamour of drama and prestige of prime time programming.<sup>33</sup> Format producers and distributors were barely known in the TV industry; they were ‘door-to-door salesmen’ visiting broadcasters with ‘a bag of tapes’ selling formats like one would sell ‘brushes’ (Hearsey, interview 2010).

### **The 1990s: Dawn of a new age**

The foundations of today's multi-billion dollar format industry that comes with protective trade bodies (FRAPA), glitzy awards ceremonies in Cannes and super-formats that vow audiences around the world were laid down in the 1990s. On the supply side, the industry organically expanded, the first two global production companies were created, new TV genres emerged that could easily be formatted, and the heartbeat of the trade moved from the USA to Europe. On the other side, demand for formats grew exponentially because an ever increasing number of broadcasters, operating in an ever increasing number of commercial broadcasting systems, lacked the expertise to create what audiences always prefer: local shows (Rodrigue, interview 2008). All these changes came together in the last decade to create the sharp expansion and globalization of the international format flow.

#### *International expansion and the formation of two format powerhouses*

The 1990s was a period of rapid expansion for international format producers. Jeremy Fox, Action Time's founder, had never sold a format to a European country when his company was acquired by Zenith (itself owned by Carlton Communication) in 1988. The new joint directors, Trish Kinane and Stephen Leahy, realised that expansion would come from selling formats abroad and within five years had 40 shows in production in Europe (Life, 1993). By the time they left the company in 2001, Action Time was trading in 30 countries (Aston, 2001). International hits included the *Alphabet Game*, *Catchphrase*, *Wipeout* and *You've Been Framed!* (Fry, 1995; Kinane and Leahy, interview 2010).

The BBC was not especially active in the format trade, even though the

*Antiques Roadshow*, *Jim 'll Fix It*, and *That's Life* were adapted abroad. Things changed in the 1990s when the corporation realised that formats were a way of exploiting its expansive intellectual property. The BBC appointed Colin Jarvis to the new position of head of format licensing in February 1994 (*Broadcast*, 1994), two months before launching BBC Worldwide with eyes set firmly on international growth (Carter, 1996). Among the first formats the BBC pushed for export were *Ask The Family*, *Confessions* and *Noel's House Party*, and the two greatest successes were *The Generation Game* and *Pets Win Prizes*, which was adapted in about 15 countries (Jarvis, interview 2010).

It was also the time when the first two global format powerhouses formed. When Joop van den Ende and John de Mol merged their concerns in January 1994, forming Endemol, they became the world's largest independent production company worth an estimated \$225 million (Moran 2006: 91-4; Smith and Life, 1993). The two format pioneers combined their international operations and Endemol started life with subsidiaries in Germany, Luxembourg and Portugal (Bell, 1994). By the time *Big Brother* launched at the end of the decade, Endemol had TV production companies in 10 territories and was selling formats in about 20 more (Endemol, 2007: 8).

Pearson Television was formed at about the same time. The company, best known for owning the *Financial Times* but essentially a hedge fund specializing in media assets, began investing in television in the early 1990s. It acquired Thames Television, the UK's largest independent producer, in April 1993 and appointed Greg Dyke, formerly LWT's managing director, to head its TV division in January 1995 (Masters, 1993). Dyke immediately realised that growth would

come from international expansion and thus acquired Reg Grundy's company for £175 million within four months of his appointment (Bateman 1995; Dyke, interview 2010). It proved a very good deal as Grundy had an exceptionally large international footprint: by the mid-1990s, it had subsidiaries in Asia, Latin America, USA and several European countries (Moran 1998).

All American Communications was another significant acquisition, which Dyke chased for two years before the board accepted his £233 million offer in October 1997. All American was a lucrative syndication business but much of its value resided in a company it had acquired three years earlier: Fremantle! (Benson 1994). What Dyke was after were the Goodson-Todman formats that Fremantle licensed or produced in 30 territories, and of course the library's crown jewel: *The Price is Right* (Dyke, interview 2010).

Within a few years Dyke had made Pearson the world's leading format producer. He intuitively understood the strategic value of formats in overseas expansion and by 2000 his company was selling formats in at least 36 territories. Its 12 formats totalled in excess of 150 local versions, three of them (*Child's Play*, *Family Feud* and *The Price is Right*) were distributed in over 20 markets (Elliott 2001).

Endemol's and Pearson's strategies were essentially similar: they used formats in high-volume genres (game shows and serial dramas) in order to control risk, manage uncertainties and of course expand internationally. So similar were they that they came close to a merger several times throughout the 1990s (Dyke, interview 2010).

### *New entrants, new genres*

Aside from the expansion of existing players, an increasing number of TV producers began to enter the industry as they realised the strategic value of formats. One such company was Harry de Winter's IDTV, originally a producer of game shows and 'docusoaps' – one of the source genres of reality TV – for the Dutch market. De Winter developed formats in order to increase international revenue and his biggest success became *Lingo*, a game show versioned in more than ten countries (*Broadcast* 1992; Baker 1996a). *Taxi*, *Karaoke TV*, *Gossip*, *Brainstorm*, *Young Matchmakers* and *Grand Slam* also travelled well (Baker 1996a).

Bazal Productions was founded by Peter Bazalgette in 1987, who sold it to the Guardian Media Group's TV production concern (*Broadcast Communications*) three years later. Realising that GMG could not develop the company any further, he urged them to sell it to Endemol, forming GMG Endemol Entertainment in 1998 (Bazalgette, interview 2009). Bazalgette was among the early developers of 'lifestyle' shows, one of the ancestors of factual entertainment, which is today's leading genre in the global format industry in terms of total number of exported episodes (FRAPA 2009: 20). Bazalgette's three most successful formats in the 1990s were *Ready Steady Cook*, sold in about 30 countries, *Changing Rooms*, about 20 territories, and *Ground Force*, with 10 local adaptations (Bazalgette, interview 2009).

The format industry's centre of gravity shifted from the USA to Europe in the 1990s, as illustrated by all these companies. It is also during this period that a growing number of formats originated in the UK – a country that has since

become the world's leading format exporter (FRAPA 2009: 11-13). The British TV production sector was thriving thanks to a very favourable regulatory environment, and several UK producers, following the lead of Action Time, Bazal and Pearson, decided to use formats in order to expand overseas (Chalaby 2010; Doyle and Paterson, 2008).

In 1998, Mentorn, Barraclough and Carey (MBC) came to market with three formats: *Whose House*, *Claim to Fame* and *Robot Wars*. The latter was a TV show developed by Steve Carsey based on an American 'sport' invented by Mark Thorpe. It proved particularly successful on the international TV market and developed a cult following in several territories (Carsey, interview 2010). RDF Television had *Scrapheap Challenge* and *Wheeler Dealers*, NBD Entertainment *Endurance* and *The Cooler*, and Hat Trick Productions *Whose Line Is It Anyway?* (Davies 1998).

A second crucial shift is that for the first time the format industry expanded beyond game shows to embrace the emerging genres of reality television and factual entertainment. Several formats sold by IDTV and Endemol in the Netherlands, foreshadowed reality TV. For instance, Endemol's *Love Letters* involved TV weddings and *All you need is love* purported to mend broken relationships. Meanwhile, several independent British TV production companies such as Bazal, MBC or RDF were developing lifestyle shows such as *Ready Steady Cook* and *Scrapheap Challenge* that would soon morph into the factual entertainment genre covering makeover and coaching shows, life swap and observational reality series. Today, factual entertainment is by far the most important genre of the format industry both in terms of number of exported



episodes and exported production costs (FRAPA, 2009: 20-1).

### **Conclusion: Understanding the super-formats**

This article set out to understand the evolution of the format trade from its origins to the format revolution of the late 1990s. It argued that the two key decades were the 1950s, when the key principles of the trade were established and the 1990s, when the wheels that led to the super-formats were set in motion. Indeed, many features that characterized these formats became apparent in the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

First, two of the super-formats (*Big Brother* and *Pop Idol*) were produced by the two global production companies that formed in the 1990s, Endemol and Pearson Television (re-baptised FremantleMedia by its new owner, RTL). Second, all of these shows originated in Europe, confirming the region's newly established leadership in the TV format industry. Three of them came from the UK (Celador's *Millionaire*, Planet 24's *Survivor* and *Pop Idol*), heralding Britain's dominance in the trade. Furthermore, all these formats, bar *Millionaire*, helped establish reality TV on schedules worldwide, about a decade after Dutch and British production companies began to commercialise the genre. Finally, all of these formats had to do well in America in order to be successful worldwide,<sup>34</sup> and it can also be noted that the American TV market opened up to foreign formats in the 1990s only. As mentioned in the notes, Beryl Vertue began selling sitcom formats to US TV networks in the 1970s, but her feat was the exception rather than the rule. Just before *Millionaire*, *Survivor* and *Idols* became ratings hits across the Atlantic, independent British TV production companies registered three hits in the USA.

The first was *Ready Steady Cook*, which Bazalgette sold to the Food Network in 1995. The channel re-labelled it *Ready Set Cook*, and the show embarked on a long (and still going) syndication career (Bazalgette, interview 2009). This was followed by MBC's *Robot Wars* and Hat Trick Productions's *Whose Line Is It Anyway?* towards the end of the decade (Davies 1998).

It has rightly been argued that these super-formats helped place the format trade where it is today: at the heart of the world television industry (Bazalgette 2005). They travelled faster and further than any before them, they demonstrated to broadcasters the benefits of adapting shows with a proven track record, they became mega brands and were turned into global franchises, and all in all helped re-define television in the 2000s. But it was important to remember that before making history, these formats were products of history, and that before helping to change television they were the outcomes of earlier shifts.

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(Company names and job titles at time of interview)

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<sup>1</sup> Pink note from N. Collins to G. L. Marshall, 20 September 1946, File R19/526, Entertainment, *Ignorance is Bliss*, 1945-1953, BBC Written Archives Centre (WAC).

<sup>2</sup> File R19/526, Entertainment, *Ignorance is Bliss*, 1945-1953, WAC.

<sup>3</sup> 'Note from the Programme Contracts Manager', 19 March 1947, in T14/584, TV O.B. *Ignorance is Bliss*, 1947, WAC.

<sup>4</sup> Unsigned memo, 2 June 1948, R12/230/2, Copyright "Twenty Questions", March 1948-1950, File 1B, WAC.

<sup>5</sup> Letter, from Ronald Waldman, Acting Head of Television Light Entertainment, BBC, 15 November 1950; Letter from L.P.R. Roche, Assistant Solicitor, BBC, 18 February 1954; both in File 1B, WAC.

<sup>6</sup> Unsigned memo, 25 May 1951, T12/457/3, TV Light Entertainment, "What's My Line?", File 1, 1<sup>st</sup> Series, 1951, WAC.

<sup>7</sup> R12/2511, "What's My Line?", Copyright, 1955-1962, WAC.

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.ukgameshows.com/ukgs/What's\\_My\\_Line%3F](http://www.ukgameshows.com/ukgs/What's_My_Line%3F), consulted in August 2010.

<sup>9</sup> Letter from Ronald Waldman, Head of Light Entertainment Television, to A.H. Cop, 27 May 1955; Memorandum of agreement signed by R.G. Walford, Copyright Department, BBC, and Kenneth Cleveland, MCA England, 27 July 1955, R126/481/1, Copyright Registry 'This is Your Life', 1955-1965, WAC.

<sup>10</sup> Letter from M. Standing to M. Winnick, 10 December 1948, R19/526, Entertainment, *Ignorance is Bliss*, 1945-1953, WAC.

<sup>11</sup> Letter from M. Standing to M. Winnick, 10 March 1949, R19/526, Entertainment, *Ignorance is Bliss*, 1945-1953, WAC

<sup>12</sup> G.D.G. Perkins, internal memo, 28 March 1947, File R12/230/1, Copyright "Twenty Questions", 1947 - Feb 1948, File 1A, WAC.

<sup>13</sup> Letter from Perkins to Winnick, 12 November 1947, File R12/230/1, Copyright "Twenty Questions", 1947 - Feb 1948, File 1A, WAC.



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<sup>14</sup> Memo from L. Wellington, controller of the Home Service, 23 February 1948, File R12/230/1, Copyright “Twenty Questions”, 1947 - Feb 1948, File 1A, WAC.

<sup>15</sup> Letter from Bernard B. Smith to H.F. Burns, BBC New York Office, 28 June 1948, R12/230/2, Copyright “Twenty Questions”, March 1948-1950, File 1B, WAC.

<sup>16</sup> Agreement ‘Accepting the sum of £1,000 from the BBC for any sound broadcast of Twenty Questions’, signed by Maurice Winnick, and L.P.R. Roche, the BBC Assistant Solicitor, 18 January 1949, File R12/230/1, Copyright *Twenty Questions* 1947 – Feb 1948, File 1A, WAC.

<sup>17</sup> Letter from Ronald Waldman, 15 November 1950; Letter from B.E. Nicolls, Director of Home Broadcasting, R12/230/1, Copyright “*Twenty Questions*”, March 1948-1950, File 1B, WAC.

<sup>18</sup> Contract between Maurice Winnick and Miss M.T. Candler, Head of Copyright, the BBC, 29 June 1951, in R12/239/1, Copyright ‘What’s My Line?’, 1951-Oct. 1952, WAC.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> More than half a century after the signing of this contract, industry lawyers still describe format trading as ‘the selling of *remake rights* which enable buyers to produce a local remake of the original programme tailored to suit their domestic television market’ (European Broadcasting Union, 2005: 3).

<sup>21</sup> R.G. Walford, 4 April 1952, R12/239/1, Copyright What’s My Line? 1951-Oct. 1952, WAC.

<sup>22</sup> Letter from Ronald Walman to Maurice Winnick, 6 February 1952, T12/467/1 TV Light Ent, Maurice Winnick 1a: 1950-1954, WAC.

<sup>23</sup> Internal document from Dennis Main Wilson to the Variety Booking Manager, 21 February 1949, R19/870, Entertainment, ‘Opportunity Knocks’, 1948-1960, WAC. *Chance of a Lifetime* features many attributes of current talent shows: the contestants, either amateurs or ‘pros who haven’t hit the big time’, the compere who was ‘a really well-known name in the entertainment world’, the weekly guest star and the show’s winner, at the time determined by audience applause. Letter from Winnick to Waldman, 19 December 1951, T12/467/1 TV Light Ent, Maurice Winnick 1a: 1950-1954, WAC.

<sup>24</sup> Additional background information retrieved from <http://www.ukgameshows.com/>, a source considered authoritative by several interviewees.

<sup>25</sup> [http://www.ukgameshows.com/ukgs/Criss\\_Cross\\_Quiz](http://www.ukgameshows.com/ukgs/Criss_Cross_Quiz)

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.ukgameshows.com/ukgs/Dotto>.

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<sup>27</sup> It resumed international acquisitions with *College Bowl*, which Granada renamed *University Challenge* and that first aired in September 1962 (Black, 1972: 206).

<sup>28</sup> Radio-Luxembourg also achieved the feat of selling the first format ever purchased by an American broadcaster: *Cent francs par seconde*, which debuted on the radio station in 1951, was adapted for an American audience with the help of a French team and premiered on DuMont Television Network in September 1953, moving to NBC in July 1954 (Schmitt 2005: 108; Schwartz et al 1999: 58).

<sup>29</sup> *Superstars*, a head-to-head competition involving two former sports stars, began on ABC in January 1974 and aired on Antenne 2 in 1977. The format also reached the UK, Belgium, Sweden and Holland (Leveneur, 2005: 206; McNeil, 1997: 805).

<sup>30</sup> Letter from Luker to Ronnie Waldman, undated but circa January 1951, R12/239/1 Copyright What's My Line, 1951-Oct. 1952, BBC Written Archives Centre.

<sup>31</sup> [http://www.ukgameshows.com/ukgs/Play\\_Your\\_Hunch](http://www.ukgameshows.com/ukgs/Play_Your_Hunch); [http://www.ukgameshows.com/ukgs/Call\\_My-Bluff](http://www.ukgameshows.com/ukgs/Call_My-Bluff), accessed in February 2010.

<sup>32</sup> The other exporting nations of note during this decade were Australia, Japan, Britain and France (*La Chasse au trésor (Treasure Hunt)* and *Des Chiffres et des lettres (Countdown)*) (Copper-Chen, 1994: 146-7). Britain, in particular, began exporting sitcom formats in the early 1960s, starting with *Hancock's Half Hour* and *Steptoe and Son*, sold by the legendary Beryl Vertue to Finland and Holland respectively (Potter, 2008: 29). Her first deal with a US TV network was for *Until Death Us Do Part*, a BBC sitcom that premiered on CBS as *All in the Family* in January 1971 (Baker, 1996b; Potter, 2008: 48-51). This deal was followed by a few other adaptations but as a rule sitcoms and comedies do not travel well because almost as much talent is required to adapt them as to create them. Indeed, in addition to countless pilots that were never commissioned, comedies such as *Birds of A Feather*, *Absolutely Fabulous*, *Men Behaving Badly* and *Fawlty Towers* (the latter despite three attempts) did not perform well in America (Baker, 1996b). Thus success remained elusive and the format trade in scripted entertainment was not comparable to US game shows.

<sup>33</sup> In 1990, just over one third of game shows aired worldwide were formats and in Northern and Western Europe about two thirds (Copper-Chen, 1994: 146).

<sup>34</sup> So much so that Latin American and Asian buyers of *Millionaire* thought they were acquiring an American game show (Spencer, interview 2008).