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Production format as technology transfer:
Adapting Grundy’s production mode in Finland

Television formats usually include a concept or an idea for a television programme. These programme formats export television content from one culture to another, while other formats focus on transferring production know-how across the borders. In this paper I will develop the idea of production format as technology transfer. Albert Moran introduced the technology transfer theory to television scholars in his 1998 book Copycat TV, but since then, the theory has hardly been applied in format study or television studies. However, if technology is not understood as a physical piece of hardware but rather as a social creation, the theory has a lot to offer. To elucidate my theoretical suggestion, I will use a Finnish soap opera called Salatut elämät (‘Secret Lives’, 1999–) as an example. Salatut elämät is the first daily soap produced in Finland. The fictional world of the serial is located in a department house in Helsinki and the storylines follow the lives of several neighboring families. While the original idea for Salatut elämät was created in Finland, the industrial model for producing a daily soap was acquired from the Australian Grundy Productions. To analyse the elements and functions of the production format I have interviewed two executive producers of the show as well as the former programming director from the respective broadcasting company, MTV3.

Theorising television format

As format study is an emerging field of study internationally (Moran 2009a, 12), the theorisations on the functions of television format are still quite few. Most of them focus on studying television format as a programme format – as the transfer of content from one culture to another. Albert Moran first defined television format as ‘a set of invariable elements in a programme out of which the variable elements of an individual episode are produced’ (Moran 1998, 13). The elements of a programme format thus include a written description of the show, the format Bible, production consultancy services, blueprints, computer software, sounds, scripts, footage etc. (Moran 1998, 14). In his later works, reflecting the professionalization of the global format trade, Moran distinguished
paper format from television format. Whereas paper format refers to a written document outlining in detail all the key components of a programme and the manner in which these come together, television format means ‘the total body of knowledge systematically and consciously assembled to facilitate the future adaptation under license of the programme’ (Moran & Malbon 2006, 6–7).

The idea of television format as a programme concept has later been confirmed in a number of publications. Although some of these acknowledge that a television format may constitute a significant transfer of expertise (like Chalaby 2011) or involve a production technology (like Fusco and Perrotta 2008), they focus on studying television format as a transfer of content. Thus we can say that Moran’s idea of television format as technology transfer has been underdeveloped.

**Technology transfer theory and television formats**

Technology transfer refers to the import of a new kind of technology from one country to another (Todd 1995, 13). My main guide to the technology transfer theory here is Jan Todd’s study (1995) on the transfer of anthrax vaccination and the cyanide process of gold extraction in the colonial Australia. As Albert Moran notes, it may require a little imagination to see a television format as a cultural technology (Moran 1998, 173), but there are a lot of similarities.

A technology always arises in a particular time and place. This poses a problem for transfer to locations where needs, constraints and inputs may differ from those of the original environment. Adaptation may thus be necessary, and the relationship between sender and receiver is crucial. (Todd 1995, 13.) Todd also emphasises the importance of context in receiving new technologies. The social, political and economic conditions need to create an effective demand to the technology, but the human, financial and infrastructural capacity are also needed to put the technology into productive use (Todd 1995, 11). Technological systems can be regarded as social creations whose various constituents are brought together by individuals or organisations to solve a particular problem and to achieve a particular practical end. The constituents may be physical items, organisational components from factory layout to internal management procedures, scientific and technological knowledge and legislative factors (Todd 1995, 12). According to Todd, technology transfer can be seen either as “the most recent stage of imperialism”, or as enhancing the local development of skills and infrastructure by stimulating complementary research and development (Todd 1995, 9).
Salatut elämät as a production format

For Moran, the theoretical value of the technology transfer theory lies just in the fact that it sees technology as an outcome of a specific social environment or system (Moran 1988, 174). The production format of Salatut elämät dates back to Australia, where the Grundy Organisation launched a new soap opera in 1985. Neighbours became the most popular soap in Australia (Crofts 1995, 98) and helped to open the doors for Grundy Organisation elsewhere in the world (Moran 2013, 169). In 1987 Grundy established a British subsidiary, Reg Grundy Productions (GB) Ltd. opened an office in London and was to serve as both a UK production centre and a European base (Moran 2013, 172). Since the late 1970s, Grundy had employed three kinds of local involvement. The first was the establishment of an independent Grundy office in a new television market as a prelude to local production of programmes (as in the UK). A second and more common pattern was to enter into a joint-venture arrangement with an established domestic production company. A third strategy was to license Grundy format to a local broadcaster or production company (Moran 2013, 163). In Finland, Grundy applied the third strategy by licensing the soap opera production format to a Finnish commercial broadcaster, MTV3.

In the mid-1990s, MTV3 was aiming to launch a daily soap opera. The production process started with the search of a companion capable of delivering volume (in terms of episodes) and quality (in terms of soap genre) (Harma 2015). Both Albert Moran and the producer of Salatut elämät Sarita Harma from MTV3 acknowledge that Grundy had developed a streamlined, high-speed, low-cost way of producing programming, which they then exported to Europe (Moran 2013, 166-167; Harma 2015). A visit to a Grundy’s ongoing drama production in Sweden (probably Skilda världar) also helped to assure the Finns of the advantages of the production mode (Äijälä 2015). As Harma (2015) states, production format is about transferring the production process itself as well as the management and scheduling of that process. A production format was thus licensed from Grundy in order to sustain the supply of the episodes and improve the efficiency of the drama production (Harma 2015; Äijälä 2015).

Grundy Productions naturally offered MTV3 a number of soap opera concepts they had produced in other parts of the world, for example in Germany and in Sweden, but the adaptation process was considered too complicated (Harma 2015). Sarita Harma (2015) then came up with the original idea of a soap opera dealing with Finnish family secrets and taboos. Grundy Productions gave their
approval for the idea and the narrative was developed in co-operation. Although the storylines of Salatut elämät have some similarities with those of the Neighbours, the content is all Finnish, states the executive producer Eerika Vermilä from FremantleMedia Finland (Vermilä 2015). For the first two years, all the storylines, treatments and dialogues were written in Finnish, translated to English and sent to the UK to be supervised and edited by the Grundy writers. After all this, the scripts were translated back into Finnish (Harma 2015). Those in charge of developing the scripts were not only British but also American, Irish and New Zealander, which naturally made the cultural adaptation even more complicated (Harma 2015; Vermilä 2015). Teacher-agents and flying producers were giving advice on writing, producing, directing and promoting the programme (Harma 2015; Vermilä 2015). The very first executive producer of the serial moved from Sweden to Finland for the first year of the production (Harma 2015). In 1995, the Grundy companies were bought by a UK conglomerate Pearson Television (Moran 2013, 200), which later became FremantleMedia. Consulting has not been needed for several years now, and external writers are only used occasionally (Harma 2015). Like many other format adaptations, Salatut elämät has gradually become a rather independent production.

Production format as technology transfer

Technology transfer always includes costs, both obvious, like license costs, and less obvious, like the cost of time spent by instructors and supervisors (Todd 1995, 206). Translating and adaptation is also required. Knowledge of the existing technology is not enough, but various kinds of adjustments are needed to reduce the dissonance between new and old, foreign and local. In any technology transfer key individuals, like flying producers, lead to common perceptions of possible solutions (Todd 1995, 208). Like stated above, technology transfer may benefit the receiving country or culture both directly and indirectly. Grundy’s production format imported new skills and new professions to Finland especially in the field of screenwriting. The writing process of a daily soap has multiple phases and includes working in groups which was a new method in Finland at that time (Harma 2015). Grundy also made a major investment in Finnish television production. Salatut elämät has employed a large number of people over the years and offered them career paths by enabling movement between different positions (Harma 2015 & Vermilä 2015). Harma (2015) acknowledges that the writing methods of Salatut elämät have been adopted in other productions by MTV3 and the production personnel is now educating their colleagues in other European countries.
Salatut elämät as a production format is a unique case in Finnish television production. As a production format is about purchasing the structure and practices of a television production rather than about licensing television content, it serves as an example of technology transfer.

**Literature:**


Interviews

Harma, Sarita, head of drama and producer of *Salatut elämät*, MTV3, interviewed by author 19th February 2015 in Helsinki

Vermilä, Eerika, CEO and executive producer of *Salatut elämät*, FremantleMedia Finland, interviewed by author 29th January 2015 in Helsinki

Äijälä, Tauno, programming director (retired), MTV3, interviewed by author 4th May 2015 in Helsinki