

Impact of globalisation on british television



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Since its birth, British television has been constantly growing, evolving to suit the needs and, more recently, tastes of its viewers. What started off as a few public service channels broadcasting only at certain times during the day became a 24 hour service with hundreds of programs from which to choose from. Many factors have contributed to this gradual growth, but in this essay I will be looking at the influence globalisation has had on this thriving industry, viewing Britain as both an importer and exporter of formats on the global market.

To start with, the term “ globalisation”, as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary, means “ the process by which businesses or other organizations develop international influence or start operating on an international scale, widely considered to be at the expense of national identity.” In television terms, this means that a broadcaster decides to sell, on the international market, the format of already popular shows in order for them to be recreated in other countries. This way, a show originally produced in Britain, for example, can be adapted in any other part of the world by following the format guide sold by the creators. In his book *Copycat TV; Globalisation, Program formats and Cultural identity (1998)* , Albert Moran explains that “ like a cooking recipe, the guide identifies both the ingredients and the sequence and manner of their combination that will produce an adaptation”.

On one hand, Britain has always been a major importer of foreign shows. Even now, if we turn on our television, chances are we will eventually stumble across a rerun of a popular American sitcom such as *Friends*, *How I met your mother* or *The Big Bang Theory* , to list a few. There are two major reasons for this, the first being that the broadcasters need programs to fill

out the time slots. Since the 1980s, the pace of change in the television industry has accelerated. The introduction of 24-hour broadcasting brought the need for new programs, a demand that was best met by inexpensive imports or local variations of internationally formatted broadcasts. These would be aired at either off-peak hours of the day or between two long running, popular shows, maximizing the number of viewers. The other reason for purchasing overseas shows is the costs. More often than not, investing in an already successful show would be cheaper than producing a show domestically, though Moran suggests that this strategy does not necessarily guarantee good ratings or add revenues. Soap operas, or simply soaps, could be considered the go-to time fillers for television not only in the UK, but all over the world. The first soaps were cheap to produce, resulting in barely mediocre content. They were sponsored by American manufacturers of household cleaning products, such as Procter and Gamble, and owed the term "opera" in their title to the excessively emotional and dramatic nature of their content. What truly transformed the genre, as implied by Renée Dickason's article *The Popular on British Television: Global Perspectives, National Priorities, Local Preferences*, was the launch of *Coronation Street* on British television in 1960, which took a more serious approach by aiming at high standards of acting and scriptwriting. The show appealed to large audiences and attracted an incredible amount of viewers, inspiring American companies to invest more time and money in their own content, thus leading indirectly to the global success of *Peyton Place* and *Dallas*.

Despite the fact that importing and airing entire shows is the easiest way to provide the viewers with entertainment around the clock, many countries,

including the UK, prefer producing their own versions of foreign programs, adapting them to their nation's culture and preferences. " A locally-produced version of *Wheel* (referring to the American game show *Wheel of Fortune*) will be more expensive than the imported version but, with local contestants, hosts, questions and references, prizes and so on, it is likely to have more national appeal and is therefore likely to achieve better ratings. Certainly (...) that seems to be borne out by some long term studies of the process of import-substitution of television programs", demonstrates Albert Moran in his before mentioned book. One of the earliest examples of international formatting is the case of the famous panel quiz game *What's My Line* which first aired July 16th 1951 on BBC. Due to all its apparently domestic elements, such as having a popular Irish presenter, lady panelists in evening dress and their male counterparts in dinner jackets, few if any viewers suspected that it wasn't an original British program, but an adaptation of an American radio show for which the BBC paid its creators the princely sum of 25 guineas per episode (Brunt, 1985, p 28). Despite this, R. Brunt still considers that the show has a " naturalized Britishness" to it, clarifying that " the choice of contestants appeals to a Britishness which ' all of us' are assumed to share: an enjoyment of eccentricity and an ability to laugh at ourselves - as transmitted and endorsed by one of Britain's favorite Irishmen." (Brunt, 1985, ' What's my Line?'). Global television formats are designed to be easily adapted in other countries or regions and therefore have no nationally-specific characteristics, making it understandable why most people do not mind them being imported. A more recent example is ITV1's *Take Me Out* , a dating show inspired by London Weekend Television's *Blind Date* . At a first glance it doesn't seem to be anything other than a <https://assignbuster.com/impact-of-globalisation-on-british-television/>

quintessentially British show, but in reality it was developed in France by Fremantle Media. First it was aired in Australia, where it did not benefit from massive success, afterwards being sold to Japan, the Netherlands, Denmark, Finland, Indonesia, Spain and Sweden and ITV1, as an article on The Guardian's website states.

On the other hand, Britain is also a leading exporter of programs, not only to the English speaking nations, but worldwide, thanks to appealing cultural elements and to technical expertise in particular fields like detective stories, situation comedies and costume drama. Series such as the 1960 *The Avengers*, which had strong elements reminding the viewers of the *James Bond* franchise, were the only British shows aired regularly on American television before the introduction of *Who wants to be a Millionaire*, "England's most successful cultural export in the last 30 years", according to the New York Times, 1999. The popular quiz show has become a global format broadcasted in more than 100 countries, the franchise now being owned by Sony. Another, more recent British show format that was aired in more than 20 countries is the dinner party contest *Come Dine With Me* which won a Royal Television Society Award back in 2010. Generating approximately 4000 episodes around the world, it's global sales have earned ITV Studios more than £57m and helped it's international production revenue increase by 41% that year. In an interview to *The Guardian*, Tobi de Graaff, ITV Studios's director of global TV distribution, said: "It is a little like McDonald's or Starbucks. Take what's successful about the show but don't ignore that you are dealing with different cultures and make the right twists to make it feel extremely home-grown and natural." *Weakest Link*, the

television game show which first appeared in the United Kingdom on BBC Two on 14 August 2000 and ended on 31 March 2012, is another great example of British show formats, being adapted in 46 countries and still airing the original British version around the world on BBC Entertainment. Even though the formats vary slightly, the main elements which define the show are reproduced in each adaptation. This usually includes selecting a host which resembles Anne Robinson, the original and iconic presenter of the UK version. *Strictly Come Dancing* or *Dancing with the Stars*, as it is known in the over 40 countries the format has been exported to, is a British television show, featuring celebrities with professional dance partners competing in Ballroom and Latin dances. Due to its widespread nature, the series became the world's most popular television program among all genres in 2006 and 2007, reaching the Top 10 in 17 countries, according to the magazine *Television Business International*.

In conclusion, globalization had an immense role in molding the British television industry along the years. Not only did it shape it and its viewers with the aid of imported shows and local adaptations, but also other nations around the globe by exporting formats and authentic British programs. By acquainting the public with foreign shows, television has the power to provide a sense of wonder and educate its viewers about the different cultures and people inhabiting our world and, at the same time, cater for their need for entertainment. Globalisation in the TV industry has brought about a new era for Britain, as it has extended its influence to every television set in the UK and around the world.