

FORMAT ESPRESSO's

Lecture Notes

THE 3 CHALLENGES OF TOMORROW'S FORMATS

We all know that we are going through a difficult period for television and audiovisual in general. In this not particularly positive scenario, formats are still in relatively good health: according to some reports, the global production of TV formats is growing modestly but steadily (unlike fiction, which is shrinking due to various factors: the strike by actors and scriptwriters, cost-cutting by broadcasters...). However, it is essential to rethink formats on the basis of these three fundamental parameters:

RELEVANCE

It is true that one of the strengths of formats is that they are usually quite simple (not banal): simple for the viewer to consume, relatively simple to create and produce, at least compared to fiction.

What's more, formats are both efficient and effective, flexible (episodes can be added or removed with relative ease and speed, depending on how things are going) and 'scalable' (from a concept, it's often possible to produce a big primetime show for a major national - or international - broadcaster, or cheap content for a small AVoD). So, it is easy to see why they are a kind of 'safe haven asset' in these complicated times.

On the other hand, at least some of them have to be relevant, i.e. they have to have a truly original twist, capable of leaving a mark and being noticed. And therein lies the problem: this season there have been very few original formats (or at least formats that are in any way noteworthy). I can only name two, maybe three. All the others - let's face it - were just (small) 'variations on a theme' of things that had been seen hundreds (if not thousands) of times before.

In short, more courage is needed, both on the part of the production companies and content creators who also have to face greater challenges and more ambitious projects, and above all on the part of the broadcasters who have to air them. Otherwise, there is a risk that formats will be seen only as a 'commodity', a kind of 'fungible content', useful mainly to fill the schedule at a relatively low price.

MULTIPLATFORM

Increasingly, formats must be designed to adapt to a global, multi-platform scenario where the boundaries between linear and online are effectively blurred. Television content - and formats in particular - are constantly moving from one context to another:

- From one digital platform to another bigger/known/relevant one. E.g.: *7 vs Wild* from YouTube to Freevee, *House of Sims* from OFTV to Netflix, and of course MrBeast, "the king of YouTube", producing his own show on Prime Video.
- From linear channel to digital channel. E.g.: *The Circle* from Channel 4 to Netflix, *Family Feud* from ABC to Netflix, *Are You Smarter Than a 5th Degree* from Fox (and others) to Prime Video, and many, many others.
- From digital channel to linear channel (less common, but not so rare). E.g. *In Love & Toxic: Blue Therapy* from YouTube to Channel 4.
- "Hybrid" formats. E.g.: *The Chase-Sideman Edition* (YouTube + ITV), *BGT Reacts* (ITVX + ITV), *Dans Avec les Stars / Dans avec les Stars d'Internet* (Twitch + TF1).

Currently, the most common model for moving from the linear to the online world is to use Internet celebrities as contestants/participants in 'classic' genre formats (reality shows, adventure games, dating shows, etc.). This is fine, but perhaps other, more creative solutions can be found. The case of *Second-Hand Showdown* (described in the Friday's Espresso of 2 August), is a good example.

HUMAN FACTOR

Tomorrow's formats, in order to emerge in a context in which Artificial Intelligence will be used at various levels and in all phases of production (starting with the conception/creation phase), will have to focus increasingly on the 'Human Factor (HF)'. That is, they must derive their motive of interest from the fact that they are 'produced the old-fashioned way' and have 'flesh and blood' people like us as protagonists, rather than virtual characters created with AI.

Highly emotional formats, for example, are based on the assumption that it is a 'real' human being who is experiencing those particular emotional reactions, so 'human', in their skin. Virtual protagonists, even if created as realistically as possible, would never evoke the same interest: an artificially created person crying because she has been left by another virtual entity cannot be emotionally involved.

The same can be said of the many programmes that seek to 'push' the protagonists to their limits, to see how they react to strong external pressures. Again, these are formats that work and succeed because we know that it is 'real' people, like us, who undergo these physical and psychological stresses, which in turn cause them to have these certain reactions, often very explicit and involving. If it were a virtual character (which we know it is) going through the same stresses, it would arouse absolutely nothing in us.

More generally, the human factor must be emphasised in all those programmes which satisfy certain basic human needs and which, not by chance, have been the 'reservoirs' of non-fiction content since the birth of television: to play, to emotion, to laugh. It is a simple fact of empathy that can only be triggered by the presence of our fellow human beings beyond the screen (as well as live, of course), or not at all. And where there is HF, there can be no AI, at least not overwhelmingly.

In short, the Human Factor will be the fundamental asset of tomorrow's formats. Sometimes you have to look back to move forward...

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