

Representing local identities through global television formats in China and India: A comparative analysis of Super Girl and Indian Idol 3

G. COSENTINO

Vesalius College
Brussels
gabriele.cosentino@vub.ac.be+

1. THE ADAPTATION OF GLOBAL FORMATS: SOCIAL AND POLITICAL EFFECTS OF TALENT SHOWS IN CHINA AND INDIA

On the 7th of April 2016 the Fox network aired the final episode of the fifteenth and final season of *American Idol*. Coming to an end was a show that had marked an era of television entertainment, the era of reality TV, whose main legacy is arguably the creation of a new type of celebrity, namely the ‘ordinary celebrity’ created in cooperation with the audience [WHEELLOCK STAHL, 2004; HOLMES, 2004; TURNER, 2006]. When *American Idol* debuted in 2002, the idea of allowing the public to express its opinion and vote on musical talents was a fairly radical concept. The show was frowned upon by the old guard of the music industry for its alleged populism and for allowing viewers at home to make decisions [CARAMANICA, 2016]. However, the concept worked really well and its success was so widespread that it has since inspired multiple adaptations and spin-offs worldwide, some of which have had such a resonance in the countries of adaptation that significant cultural and political effects could be subsequently observed on the basis thereof.

This article explores the potential for the *Idol* talent show format, a sub-genre of the broader reality TV genre, and of its imitations in order to generate new forms of public expression and social inclusion in China and India, thus promoting a democratisation of the respective public spheres. In particular, the article discusses the ability of the talent show genre to represent local identities vis-à-vis established cultural models endorsed or promoted by national cultural institutions, such as state televisions. To this end, a comparative analysis of two popular talent shows during the last decade is presented — *China’s Super Girl* and India’s *Indian Idol 3* — whose cultural and social effects could be regarded as carrying political implications for the issues of identity and citizenship in the world regions under observation.

Often dismissed as a genre with low informational or social value, talent shows — and reality TV in general — have attracted the attention of academic research for their ability to renew the democratic potential of the media in light of their emphasis on authenticity, audience-driven competition and meritocracy [COULDRY, 2008; CARDO, 2014; COSENTINO, 2015]. The genre, which originally emerged in the late 1990s in Europe and in the United States, has been increasingly migrating to various world regions [KRAIDY AND SENDER, 2011]. The global spread of reality TV, and its adaptations or imitations in different geographical settings, has also generated a series of relevant social and cultural phenomena, often challenging the very perception of the genre as simply constituting an outlet of entertainment. Aside

from some preliminary attempts to chart the political ramifications of the global spread of the reality TV genre [KRAIDY AND SENDER, 2011], there is still relatively little scholarship investigating the political impact of the genre in non-Western regions. In particular, there is a paucity of comparative studies attempting to identify patterns of similarities and differences in the transfer and adoption process of Western media formats in non-Western countries.

While presenting two very different political configurations, China and India have proven to be attractive markets for the flows of Western media contents and formats. In both countries, inherent social and cultural complexities have created new opportunities and tensions in relation to the growing popularity of the reality TV genre. China, more so than India, has often presented a more challenging and restrictive market and policy environment for foreign content and operations, largely because of political sensitivities and the protection of Chinese companies. Nonetheless, despite being criticised by the Communist regime and eventually temporarily suspended for its alleged vulgarity, *Super Girl* challenged a tightly controlled programming tradition while offering a rare example of «democratic entertainment» that popularised local identities among Chinese women [JIAN AND LIU, 2009].

On the other hand, *Indian Idol 3* was able to help local populations overcome long-standing differences in an ethnically and religiously divided part of Northern India, while providing unprecedented representation to traditionally marginalised local identities in the process [PUNATHAMBEKAR, 2010]. Since both *Super Girl* in China and *Indian Idol 3* in India gained a wide following and significant commercial success, generated criticism and controversy, and engendered new forms of inclusive and participatory processes, particularly with respect to the issue of identity formation, a comparative discussion of their political effects might help shed new light on the political dimensions of reality TV in non-Western countries.

Since their inauguration in the early 1990s, the broadcasting systems in China and India have undergone major transformations that have exposed the two countries, albeit to different extents, to a growing influx of Western media operations, contents and formats. The global trade of television entertainment formats is one of the most visible examples of media globalisation [MORAN, 2009], which has found in both regions of the world a receptive terrain. Entertainment is the central feature of contemporary globalisation, and it functions as an important site of negotiation between modernisation and tradition for the countries involved in the processes of cultural globalisation. However, relatively little is known about the political implications of such negotiation, and in particular about what happens when Western entertainment formats are adapted to suit the social, cultural and political conditions of different world regions.

There have been attempts [KRAIDY, 2009] to discuss the political impact of reality TV in regions outside of the Western world, focusing on how the hybridisation between Western cultural formats and local contents has generated significant political effects, breaking away with established models of modernisation centred on the role of the nation. On the one hand, one can observe the migration of the sets of values and narratives associated with Western modernity along with the reality TV genre — meritocracy, individualism, and rise to celebrity — which reveals how often these values resonate with the neo-liberal economic ethos [COULDRY, 2008] that has also spread in India and China. At the same time, reality TV shows have demonstrated the ability to engender new types of «imagined communities» on the basis of participatory practices across ethnic divides, as in the well-known example of *Afghan Star*, a talent show which not only offered an initial experience of «vicarious democracy» for many Afghans after the fall of the Taliban regime, but which also made it possible to overcome long-standing ethnic tensions while revitalising traditional music [KRAIDY AND SENDER, 2011].

According to Sender, thanks to the spread of technological and audience practices associated with the genre «reality TV might be well placed to (...) rework ideas of national identity and belonging» [SENDER IN KRAIDY AND SENDER, 2011: 6]. A *de facto* global genre such as reality TV could thus provide both contestants and audiences with the ability to represent and negotiate their identities in the form of a performance of racial and ethnic belonging. With respect to this, the genre would then give form to a new kind of «mediated politics», combining both local and global symbols, values and attitudes, by allowing «nationalism, regionalism, gender and other workings of power play out in the representations of intimate and mundane life» [SENDER IN KRAIDY AND SENDER, 2011: 6].

This reworking of local identities is the main focus of this paper, and in particular my analysis concentrates on the manner in which identities and citizenship are articulated and performed in view of the tension between the local and national dimensions in shows such as *Super Girl* and *Indian Idol 3*. To quote Sender once more: «Reality TV encourages national and ethnic allegiances... and forces to rethink the idea of a national and regional public through a mediated lens» [SENDER IN KRAIDY AND SENDER, 2011: 6]. The role of reality TV in relation to the changing ideas of national and local identities thus needs to be observed on the basis of the conjuncture between media technologies creating new forms of inclusions, interactive television entertainment empowering audience participation and unscripted drama, with its emphasis on expected outcomes, which allow, according to Van Zoonen [2004], television audiences to become an active public.

An important work on the political effects of television entertainment in India, entitled *Politics after Television* by Arvind Rajagopal [2001], wishes to inquire on the politics *after reality television*, both in India and China. As it will be discussed in greater detail in the coming sections, the celebrity-making potential of reality TV caused significant political effects in both cases under examination. China's *Super Girl* popularised provincial identities that did not fit with the ethic and aesthetic codes promoted by Chinese authorities, in the process generating high ratings but also exposure to criticism and censorship. Interestingly, the channel broadcasting *Super Girl* is a private television network, namely Hunan Satellite Television (HSTV), from the Hunan province of South Central China, which stands as one of the most successful competitors to the Chinese state television, namely CCTV.

With respect to India, the case under examination, namely *Indian Idol 3*, broadcast in the subcontinent by Sony TV, provided an unprecedented platform for the elaboration of certain deeply-rooted ethnic tensions in the Meghalaya region of North East India, which were never adequately addressed by the state media. Thanks to the rise of popularity of Amit Paul, a singer hailing from Shillong, the capital of Meghalaya, the tensions between the ethnic groups populating the region came under national scrutiny and also found some unexpected, albeit temporary, resolution.

The comparative dimension of this paper is therefore constituted on the basis of the discussion of how the tensions between the national and local dimensions are played out through the popularisation of reality TV both in China and in India. I was drawn to the case studies included in the current analysis because they shared significant commonalities with respect to the cultural and political effects of the local adaptation of global formats. They revealed how in both China and India certain local identities were able to find outlets of representation not via national state television, but thanks to the importation or imitation of global formats by local or regional commercial channels in competition with the state television, as in the case of HSTV, or by global media corporations, such as Sony TV, thus creating an opportunity for new forms of public expression and social inclusion that were either neglected or impeded by the national cultural or political institutions.

This paper is thus an attempt to provide an initial contribution to the study of the political implications of the spread of the global entertainment formats in China and India,

particularly with respect to the ability of these shows to provide platforms for public expression and social inclusion around the issue of local identity vis-à-vis national identities. The focus is on two case studies which date back to nearly a decade ago, making this preliminary comparative study historical in nature, but with the goal of opening an avenue of inquiry and research into more current instances of the phenomenon under observation.

2. THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

One of the most popular television genres of the past decade, reality television combines elements of documentary cinema, typical game show situations and semi-scripted dramatic moments, in order to create confessional and challenging situations among unprofessional or untrained contestants. Because of the visibility opportunities often granted by the genre to marginal or ordinary identities, scholars have referred to reality television as a renewed expression of the democratic potential of the media [MURRAY AND OUELLETTE, 2004].

In reality television, contestants are provided with the opportunity to enter a space where they can, through competition, public performance and by aptly balancing traits of ordinariness and talent, train their «authentic» self to develop into a mediated representation, which is what Couldry describes as the development of a «media self» [COULDRY IN MURRAY AND OUELLETTE, 2004]. This of course happens with the explicit collaboration of the audience, and on the basis of the voting mechanisms that are the driving logic behind reality TV shows. As pointed out by Holmes [2004: 156]: «The emphasis on the ordinariness of the contestants contributes to a deliberate blurring of the boundaries between contestant and viewer and as a result, a potential invocation of the audience's own aspirations (or fantasies) of success and stardom». It is exactly such appeal to the audiences, through an emotional and aesthetic identification triggering their support that allows ordinary contestants to become celebrities with the endorsement of the public.

With respect to this, quoting Hartley's idea of «democratainment», Turner suggests that reality television can increasingly act as an identity provider which can have a social and cultural impact, and that the «structure and narrativisation of much contemporary reality television programming» [TURNER, 2006: 162] have important repercussions for political representation. This is particularly relevant in the case of marginal identities or minorities, who can connect with vast audiences thanks to the exposure, legitimation and eventual popularisation process created by reality television.

According to Couldry [2008], by combining narratives of authenticity, competition and meritocracy, reality television articulates the fantasies of democratisation and upward mobility that are so popular in the current political and cultural era. With these theoretical premises in mind, the analysis provided in the following sections of two of the most prominent examples in the early popularity phases of talent shows in China and India offers some interesting material to test my hypothesis that the global flow of Western entertainment formats can generate unexpected social and political outcomes, particularly with respect to the representation of previously marginalised local identities.

Referencing the ability of reality TV to represent issues and identities towards which audiences feel a particular affinity, Cardo argues that the reality television genre could be seen as «the evolution of the Public Service Broadcasting rationale (...). As such, it appropriates notions of reality, ordinary people and audience engagement with the aim of representing its audience» [CARDO, 2013: 148]. Cardo is referring to the cultural and political impact of *Big Brother* in the UK, but similar arguments can also be made for other countries, including for example Italy, where reality TV shows took on an important social and political role in repre-

senting minorities, with a cultural operation that could be considered in continuity with the public service broadcasting tradition in the country [COSENTINO, 2015].

This final point is particularly worth discussing, as it will be explored in more depth in the coming sections, since both shows under examination were broadcast by private networks, in pursuit of competing or finding alternative strategies to those typically broadcast by national state televisions. The representation of local and marginal identities that was allowed by *Super Girl* and *Indian Idol* occurred within the specific context of the programming decisions that private broadcasters devised in order to attract audiences [KEANE ET AL., 2007; PUNATHAMBEKAR, 2010]. Both networks, namely HSTV in China and Sony TV in India, were thus willing to experiment with formats that allowed them to connect with parts of the national audiences that had been underrepresented or marginalised in the past. Such connection, as it will be revealed by the two case studies presented, generated significant opportunity for social inclusion and representation of the local audiences, in the process creating an unprecedented form of «public» service delivered by the private networks.

From a methodological perspective, I decided to present the two case studies — *Super Girl* in China and *Indian Idol* in India — that have more evidently demonstrated the ability of reality TV programmes to elicit social and political effects in non-Western countries. The comparative dimension is presented in order to offer a «transcultural» approach to the study [HEPP AND COULDRY, 2009] revealing similar patterns of tensions around national cultural institutions, such as state broadcasting, under the transformative effects of media globalisation. I chose to focus on China and India because they both have complex media systems that have experienced significant transformations in the past decade, while at the same time maintaining a strong tradition of centralised state broadcasting. Specifically, the two cases under examination demonstrate the manner in which the transfer of global TV formats into non-Western countries by private television networks can engender renewed opportunities for the representation and inclusion of social groups outside of the mediation of national broadcasting institutions.

The two case studies both date back to the mid 2000s, thus what I am presenting here is a historical overview of some of the first instances of the politically and culturally significant transfer of global formats into China and India. My analysis is mostly based on secondary sources, in particular the works by Keane et al. [2007] on *Super Girl* and by Punathambekar [2010] on *Indian Idol 3*, and the main original contribution that this study endeavours to provide rests in the comparative analysis focused on discovering patterns of similarities in the social and political effects of the transfer of Western TV formats into non-Western countries.

3. THE 'AVERAGE' SUPER GIRL: WHEN THE PROVINCE CHALLENGES THE STATE

In September 2004 China's premier Wen Jiabao, while visiting the CCTV offices in Beijing as he often did, encouraged the network executives and producers to create more programmes centred on the participation of ordinary people [KEANE ET AL., 2007]. While in the past this would have been interpreted as promoting a certain type of programming based on propagandistic documentaries or drama, the speech of the Chinese premier coincided with the launch of CCTV's talent show *Special 6+1 China Dream*, which represented the public television network's attempt to keep up with a new wave of programming featuring amateur singers that had spread across Chinese television networks.

Hunan Satellite Television's (HSTV) *Super Girl*, whose final episode broadcast in 2005 was viewed by more than 400 million people, was one of the most successful shows

in the history of Chinese television, and the market leader of the initial wave of such reality TV shows in China. Just as in the case of other popular shows broadcast by the Hunan Satellite Television, it was «conceived in response to viewer dissatisfaction with the overly pedagogic tone of existing variety formats» [KEANE ET AL., 2007: 128] on the state television CCTV and it was an effective adaptation of a foreign successful format, imitating in many respects the British format of *Pop Idol* and its American franchise *American Idol*.

It is important to observe the popularity of *Super Girl* — whose full name was *Mongolian Cow Sour Yogurt Super Girl Contest*, after the name of its main sponsor — in the context of the competition between CCTV and HSTV, as both networks make claims to be representative of different types of Chinese identities, and also of different types of celebrities. On the one hand CCTV stands for the representation of the official, state-sanctioned television celebrity, whereas on the other hand HSTV, with shows such as *Super Girl*, appeared to be endorsing a provincial, more ordinary Chinese identity, a claim justified for example in the publicity material for *Super Girl*, according to which the programme aimed to create an idol «from among ordinary people with the assistance of ordinary people» [CITED IN KEANE ET AL., 2007: 129].

The talent show format of creating a celebrity out of ordinary people thanks to the support of the audience [MURRAY AND OUELLETTE, 2004], echoing a rhetoric of viewer democracy, had a particularly strong appeal in China, where voting for politicians was and still is not allowed. However, in addition to merely providing a surrogate form of political democracy, the show tapped into widely spread attitudes with respect to power and authority, since the main source of *Super Girl's* success in China was «the ordinary idol» phenomenon [KEANE ET AL., 2007].

Long before reality TV gained popularity, Chinese media portrayed the ordinary people, which formed «the substantive core of the national project within the Chinese Communist Party's constitution» [KEANE ET AL., 2007: 132], mostly as heroes in the propagandistic narratives of progress, under the auspices of the Communist Party of China. Later, the entertainment system that emerged in the aftermath of the television liberalisation became the exclusive domain of celebrities, as Chinese television decided to focus on the development of a star system during the 1980s and 1990s. During the transition to a commercial broadcasting model, stars and celebrities constituted the focus of entertainment shows, whereas audience members were simply passive viewers.

However, with non-elitist shows such as *Super Girl*, the audience developed from being a mere viewer to becoming involved in the actual content and acting as an active participant in the programme. Keane et al. [2007] argue that the spread of global formats such as reality shows in China had the unexpected consequence of reinventing «the socialist mass», thus reflecting «a trend by which popular culture destabilises the hegemony of elite cultural forms, echoing global critiques of subsidised state culture» [CAREY, 2005 QUOTED IN KEANE ET AL., 2007: 132]. In the process, the models of cultural development endorsed by the Ministry of Culture of the Communist Party of China were undermined by the global formats adapted by the local television network, HSTV, in competition with the national state television CCTV.

It has been widely documented that Chinese television, including the entertainment sector, was strictly controlled and organised from above until the mid-1990s [DI, 2010]. Television producers worked closely in line with government directives by promoting designated role models and official heroes, and in general the relationship between producers and the viewing masses was one of deference and distance. However, since the beginning of the 21st century, new television genres such as reality TV created important transformations by allowing people into more intimate relationships with each other as audience members, either through participatory practices such as voting via SMS or via other fandom activities via the Internet, while in the process undermining the stability of the «high culture» models embedded in state television programming.

With respect to fandom practices, Keane et al. [2007] suggest that *Super Girl* facilitated the emergence of a new type of fan culture in China: «The fans of winner Li Yuchun self-identified as yumi (corn) (...). The appropriation of edible identities by fans of *Super Girl* led to the largest visible display of non-governmental organisation activity in modern China. In a nation where products of television were hitherto regarded as «spiritual food», fans' self-identification with tasty food rather than passive masses (guanzhong) is evidence of audience agency» [KEANE ET AL., 2007: 138].

It can thus be argued that the popularity and tensions around *Super Girl* encapsulate the challenges across the province vis-à-vis the political and cultural hegemony of big cities such as Beijing and Shanghai. The popularity of the show was met with a certain degree of alertness by the Chinese authorities, including the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, a political advisory body, which was particularly concerned about the alleged vulgarity of the show. Vulgarity in this case can be seen as associated with the rise in popularity and visibility of local and provincial identities, and the controversy around *Super Girl* should be observed in light of the Chinese government's sensitivity to issues of emerging local power challenging central authority.

In response to the rising popularity of *Super Girl*, CCTV held a seminar on the alleged vulgar inclinations of certain entertainment programmes in July 2005, during which some participants criticised *Super Girl*. Among the reasons which rendered state institutions, such as the aforementioned regulatory body SARFT, critical of the show was that «it focused solely on entertainment, and that candidates were harshly criticized and humiliated by judges» [DI, 2010: 101]. However, as it is often the case, censorship in China had not-so-hidden economic reasons [MARTEL, 2010], in particular with respect to the competition between HSTV and CCTV. SARFT has a proprietary interest in CCTV revenues, since CCTV gives a share of its profit to the regulatory body. With respect to this, Miao Di comments: «It's not difficult to understand how a successful show like *Super Girl* produced by a rival broadcaster incurred criticism from SARFT. ... On the contrary the similar show *Dream in China*, produced by CCTV, won encouragement and support from SARFT» [DI, 2010: 101].

The popularisation of local identities through televisual representation and audience participation could be thus seen as an unexpected consequence of the spread of global formats, which the Chinese authorities attempted to rein in considering the fact that the popularity of such formats, or of their imitations, started to pose economic and political challenges. As it is observed by a New York Times article commenting on the uneasiness of the Chinese government towards reality TV: «For decades, the party has pushed television networks here to embrace the market, but conservative cadres have grown increasingly fearful of the kinds of programs that court audiences, draw advertising and project a global image not shaped by the state» [WONG, 2011].

Miao Di [2010] further comments that the case of *Super Girl* demonstrates the growing importance of consumers' opinion in China. As Chinese audiences started to support the show more and more, particularly after the CCTV seminar criticising the talent show, the official media position on *Super Girl* became progressively more lenient for fear of eliciting animosity from the audiences. Therefore, the audiences of the show, often hailing from provincial parts of China, became an active force in the Chinese public sphere vis-à-vis government authorities, and the show remained on air, albeit with some modifications, until 2011.

4. LI YUCHUN: THE NEW FACE OF CHINESE WOMEN?

To date, the most popular singer to emerge from *Super Girl* is Li Yuchun, the winner of the 2005 edition, from the south-western Sichuan province, who has since become a bona fide pop star in China. With respect to her success, Keane et al. [2007] comment: «When the winner, Li Yuchun, triumphed in spite of her «average» performance, many attributed the popular verdict to her individuality and (...) to a unique presentation of self and a conscious decision not to conform. For instance, whereas her competitors resorted to singing revolutionary songs, Li persisted in performing songs written and performed by male artists. This, in turn, contributed to a sense of androgyny» [KEANE ET AL., 2007: 137].

With respect thereto, an article published in *The Guardian* commenting on Li Yuchun's rise to fame observed: «China's young women are in the midst of a «Supergirl rebellion», in which traits such as assertiveness, confidence and creative eccentricity have made a thrilling triumph over the old, introverted ideal of a pretty-girl (...)» [JOFFE-WALT, 2005]. More interestingly for my argument, the article adds: «People have abandoned the traditional beauty figure, and the positioning of female characters — extroverted, non-tender and outgoing women — is new for mainland China and different from the state-run beauty contests» [JOFFE-WALT, 2005].

As previously indicated, Chinese authorities did not approve of Li Yuchun's rebellion against femininity, lamenting that it was a display of provincial vulgarity. This of course signalled a first level of tension around which types of Chinese identities, and in turn which types of celebrities, are allowed to be represented on television. But most likely the authorities were not so much preoccupied by the social power accrued by an unconventional tomboy, nor by the *Super Girl* winner's challenge to China's gender identities. Rather, the main source of preoccupation was constituted by the fact that she was elected by means of a mechanism that involved the masses of provincial China, which made them feel included and subsequently granted them vast visibility in the process.

It is also important to observe that, coming from the Hunan agricultural province in central China, HSTV also presents itself as an entertainment-based television network for the average common people [JIAN AND LIU, 2009]. This sets HSTV apart from the more politically motivated CCTV in Beijing and the trendy Dragon TV in Shanghai: «In a country where the college education level is still less than 5%, HSTV positions itself as accessible for the masses, not for the elite. (...) Therefore, from the low qualifications needed during preliminary auditions to the voting that invites all viewers to join in, *Super Girl* (...) democratizes celebrities, or democratizes television» [JIAN AND LIU, 2009: 528].

As Jian and Liu point out, *Super Girl* offered an opportunity for girls from small cities in provincial China to become national celebrities, since the show did not focus on professional superstars but rather it allowed ordinary people to perform on TV: «Utilizing such a contrast, *Super Girl* successfully appeals to ordinary people. It successfully democratizes the usually unattainable TV stage, as well as the celebrity status» [JIAN AND LIU, 2009: 531]. The criticism voiced by Chinese government towards the show, and its attempt to curb its most controversial aspects could thus be interpreted as part of a deliberate strategy by the institutions to prevent such democratisation of the celebrity, for fear that it would popularise provincial or marginal identities, and that it would encourage their mobilisation towards a quasi-democratic voting mechanism.

5. GLOBALISATION ON INDIAN TELEVISION THROUGH REALITY TV

After being constrained by a state monopoly throughout the second half of the twentieth century, in the early to mid 1990s the Indian broadcasting system — just like its Chinese counterpart — underwent a liberalisation process that paved the way for the entry of a host of commercial national and transnational corporations. The creation of transnational networks such as Star Plus, as well as of Indian commercial networks such as ZEE TV and Sun, during the 1990s radically challenged the supremacy of the state-sponsored network Doordarshan and irreversibly changed the role of television as a cultural institution in India. As opposed to the «pro-development and nationalist sitcoms, dramas, and documentaries that defined the Doordarshan era, these new television channels offered a wider range of programming, including American soaps, dramas, talk shows, and music videos» [PUNATHAMBEKAR 2010: 245].

With respect thereto, scholars have spoken of a «quiet withdrawal of the state as an overt presence and the sudden appearance of an ostensibly state-free televisual space in the context of market-led globalization» [RAJAGOPAL 2015: 87]. It is worth pointing out that a 2006 Unesco study indicated how India had developed one of the least restrictive policies with respect to foreign media operations in the country, as a result of the alleviation of government regulation. This also had an impact on the television demands by an emerging middle class audience, growing in parallel with the rise of the Indian economy on a global scale. By the end of the 1990s, some estimates suggested that the viewers of cable and satellite television amounted to approximately 110 million and more recent figures claim that there is nearly half a billion viewers across the country [PUNATHAMBEKAR, 2010].

The adaptation of global media in India occurred, as it is often the case with vast world regions with a long history of cultural tradition, with a certain degree of scepticism towards foreign cultures and through an initial phase of localisation of Western media products. One prominent example is the emphasis on the *Hinglish* language — a linguistic hybrid between English and Hindi — in the programming on Star Plus and ZEE TV, in an attempt to at least partly Indianise global contents and formats. Furthermore, the development of regional and local television channels brought many programming innovations, often based on the adaptation of global formats. In turn, such transformations have exerted a deep impact on the issue of Indian identity, as per the following commented by Rajagopal: «With the opening of the economy and the exponential growth in its technological mediation, both regional and national identity appear as the aim and outcome of global capital» [2015: 88].

A watershed moment in the growing cultural impact of liberalised television was the 2000 launch on Star Plus of the quiz show *Kaun Banega Crorepati*, the Indian adaptation of the global hit *Who wants to be a millionaire?*, later popularised by the award-winning movie *Slumdog Millionaire*. According to Punathambekar, the show «represented a major departure in that it complicated industry professionals' understanding of the audience by bringing viewers in smaller cities and towns (...) into the picture. «Middle India», as the English-language press dubbed this segment of viewers, had registered in metropolitan television executives' imaginations in an unprecedented manner» [PUNATHAMBEKAR, 2010: 247]. It became evident that the television industry, particularly foreign companies competing for the lucrative Indian market, had to rethink the role of television audiences, which often involved placing renewed emphasis on previously neglected or underrepresented local identities.

Prior to the liberalisation of the media and in the period of state monopoly over television, Indian identity was predicated upon the tensions between tradition and modernity. The idea of «tradition» was largely representative of ancient Indian culture, while modernity was a loose category standing for the Western values of secularisation and democracy. The task of educating the population into watching television was appointed to

the Indian state, as part of the modernisation process, since the development of media services and infrastructures was understood as being the state's mission. After the 1990s, culture in the form of regional and national identities became increasingly politicised, and turned into a battleground for competing interests, including those of private commercial media. Both the national and the local Indian identities started to be thoroughly reworked, and some of the more popular presentations of Indian cultural themes often emerged from foreign-owned channels [RAJAGOPAL, 2015].

With respect thereto, it is worth pointing out that commercial television channels and reality television shows such as *Indian Idol* in particular have created new opportunities for audience involvement and participation, in ways and conditions which were not previously possible on state broadcasting. Doordarshan provided a platform for music, films, and other forms of cultural production from different parts of India in the name of a national public culture, but the public network often failed to adequately respond to local audience interests and desires as its main focus was the promotion of a centralised and common Indian identity.

6. OVERCOMING ETHNIC DIVISIONS IN NORTH-EASTERN INDIA: THE CASE OF INDIAN IDOL 3

Sony TV's *Indian Idol*, an adaptation of the already discussed *Pop Idol* format, constitutes an interesting case study in order to observe how the adapted global media format created platforms for the representation and reworking of local and sub-regional identities, in the process also providing new opportunities for the Indian public to experience citizenship and social participation. Co-produced by Sony Entertainment Television, *Indian Idol* emerged in the mid 2000s as one of the highest rated shows on Indian television, with over 40 million viewers during the first season in 2004—2005 [PUNATHAMBEKAR, 2010].

During the third edition of *Indian Idol*, in 2007, a significant social and political movement began to coalesce around a contestant hailing from Shillong, the capital of the North-eastern Indian region of Meghalaya. Amit Paul, a Bengali singer from a region of India that had suffered years of inter-ethnic strife between the Khasi dominant tribe and other ethnic groups, started to receive support from a plurality of ethnic groups within this region. This local collaboration between previously divided and conflicting ethnic and linguistic groups was unprecedented, and as Punathambekar points out: «It became clear that the mobilization around Amit Paul had created a 'neutral' space for a range of people to work together, and the many public activities had dramatically changed the way different groups inhabited the city of Shillong» [PUNATHAMBEKAR, 2010: 248].

According to Punathambekar, the national response to this phenomenon, particularly from news organisations in New Delhi and Mumbai, was that of incredulity, while commentators in Shillong «began debating how Amit Paul, a middle-class, Bengali, non-Khasi, had emerged as a catalyst for changing relations in Meghalaya...» [PUNATHAMBEKAR, 2010: 248]. Local institutions tried to leverage on the political potential of Amit Paul's sensation, and the local chief minister of Shillong declared Amit Paul to be Meghalaya's brand ambassador for peace, communal harmony and excellence, thus making it possible for a reality television programme to create opportunities for a redefinition, albeit temporary, of the political sphere in the Meghalaya region. Furthermore, with respect to the tensions between local and national identities that global formats such as *Indian Idol 3* represented and brought to the fore, it could be argued that Amit Paul's successful participation in a national contest such as *Indian Idol* constituted a rare opportunity for Meghalaya to express its presence and role

within the broader nation and to claim that it also belonged to the «family of India» [PUNATHAMBEKAR, 2010].

Since Meghalaya is a border region with little economic interest, national broadcasters such as All India Radio and Doordarshan never placed much emphasis on extending coverage and producing programmes with a local focus in the region. With respect thereto, Punathambekar observes that «the lack of support for production staff meant that All India Radio stations were (...) unable to produce programs in local languages and tap into the history and cultural resources of the region. Hindi-language programming only served to alienate listeners further and reinforce perceptions of New Delhi's inability and unwillingness to understand the Northeast» [PUNATHAMBEKAR, 2010: 244]. The approach adopted by public television with respect to the region was even less dedicated, since the Doordarshan station in Shillong was until 1995 «operating with just two program executives who produced 75 minutes of daily programming. They did so, moreover, with no knowledge of the local language and without key production personnel such as editors and floor managers» [PUNATHAMBEKAR, 2010: 244].

Indian Idol 3 was thus a crucial media event for the Meghalaya region, and also for the Indian mediascape in a broad sense, precisely because the ethnically diverse public that coalesced in support of Amit Paul created opportunities for interactions across ethnic and linguistic divides that had formerly posed difficulties, also due to the lack of adequate representation on the part of the state media. In other words, the cultural space and the technological opportunities of communication and interaction provided by *Indian Idol 3* created outlets through which people were able to put their differences aside, even if for a brief period of time, «as they stood in lines at telephone booths, shared mobile sim cards, and took part in rallies to support their idol» [PUNATHAMBEKAR, 2010: 252].

As suggested by Punathambekar, one useful theoretical framework that could be used to analyse the *Indian Idol 3* phenomenon and its impact on the Indian public sphere is Rajagopal's analysis of the links between the airing in the mid 1980s of a religious epic on the Indian public television Doordarshan and the subsequent rise of Hindu nationalism in Indian politics [RAJAGOPAL, 2001]. Rajagopal's analysis is based on the understanding that the normative idea of a single bourgeois public becomes difficult to maintain when it comes to television, particularly in a country like India where television had a belated and uneven development. Rajagopal's idea of 'split publics' is indicative of the notion of a public divided along linguistic and caste lines, which in his view structure political discourse in India.

For the sake of my analysis, it would be interesting to update such concept and apply it to the current Indian mediascape, observing the split between the normative idea of the national, unified public addressed by public television and the different kinds of audiences engaged by cable and satellite television, particularly by means of adapted global entertainment formats. The concept of «split publics», in this case a public split between local and national dimensions, needs to be broadened with reference to the effects of contemporary reality TV. The convergence between old and new media inherent to the genre has engendered new forms of interactive viewing practices, in the process also creating new opportunities for the representation and participation of local audiences, which, long neglected by state broadcasters, have now become «an integral aspect of contemporary television in India» [PUNATHAMBEKAR, 2010: 251].

7. REPRESENTING LOCAL IDENTITIES VIA GLOBAL FORMATS IN CHINA AND INDIA: CONCLUSIVE REMARKS

In the previous sections it has been sought to provide an introductory account of the two case studies under discussion, by pointing out the way in which both *Super Girl* and *Indian Idol 3* were able to grant visibility to the identities which were previously confined to the marginal geographic settings in China and India, and which rarely gained representation by the respective national broadcasting systems. The two case studies point to the unexpected outcomes of the adaptation of global formats across world regions characterised by vast territories and large populations, where the central government had traditionally maintained a conservative stance with respect to public broadcasting, in line with either propagandistic or pedagogic requirements. While the two regions under examination have clearly distinct features in their respective media systems, and many differences in their political history, China and India share enough similarities in order to allow for a fruitful comparative study. The liberalisation process undergone by both countries starting from the mid 90s onwards has indeed reshaped the media systems of the two regions in a significant manner, allowing for a plurality of commercial actors, local, regional and transnational, to operate and compete with state televisions, often relying on the importation and adaptation of global TV formats, the most prominent arguably being the talent show sub-genre of reality TV.

In name of a model of post-colonial modernisation based on high culture, secularism and the centralised control of the media, as a political and cultural category in relation to China's and India's localism had been marginalised in the name of national cultural and political projects of modernisation, particularly in the second half of the twentieth century. A decade into the new century, the globalisation of media contents and operations, which has been affecting both the Chinese and the Indian broadcasting systems, seems to have been able to challenge the supremacy of such national dimensions by creating an unexpected synergy between global entertainment formats and local and sub-regional cultures, in the process granting unprecedented representation to the marginal identities and empowering them, albeit temporarily, as political categories.

It remains open for inquiry and debate whether the social effects triggered by the two talent shows, as well as by other similar programmes aired in more recent times, left any significant marks on the political spheres of the two regions. Further research will be required in order to investigate whether the precedents set by *Super Girl* and *Indian Idol* have had any long-lasting effects both at the level of local cultures and politics, as well as on the strategies of national television in China and India with respect to the representation of local identities. Additionally, if I am to suggest an avenue of inquiry in the relationship between politics and entertainment in China and India, it would be the study on the transfer of values, symbols and identities from the sphere of television entertainment to that of politics, as it has already been observed in many Western countries [COSENTINO AND DOYLE, 2010].

If entertainment formats can be adapted from the West to other world regions, so, one might assume, would the political implications that these formats carry with them. The most significant contribution to this type of research would be a close analysis of the adaptation process of these formats, aimed at outlining what types of contextualised political outcomes would arise from the popularisation of celebrities — particularly the type of audience-supported, ordinary and 'authentic' celebrities created by reality TV — who could transfer their entertainment value into the political sphere.

REFERENCES

- CARDO, V., «Celebrity politics and political representation: The case of George Galloway MP on Celebrity Big Brother». *BRITISH POLITICS*, 9(2): 146–160. [2014]
- CAROMANICA, J., «‘American Idol’ Ends, Eclipsed by Internet Democracy». *The New York Times*. AVAILABLE AT: [HTTP://WWW.NYTIMES.COM/2016/04/07/ARTS/TELEVISION/AMERICAN-IDOL-SOCIAL-MEDIA-INTERNET.HTML?_R=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/07/arts/television/american-idol-social-media-internet.html?_r=0). LAST ACCESSED: APRIL 10TH, 2016. [2016]
- COSENTINO, G., «L’Isola dei Famosi: Minority politics in Italy via reality television». *JOURNAL OF ITALIAN CINEMA & MEDIA STUDIES*, 3(1+2): 117–135. [2015]
- COSENTINO, G. AND DOYLE, W., «Silvio Berlusconi. The One Man Brand» [2010] in Aronczyk, M. and Powers, D. (eds.) *Blowing up the Brand: Critical Perspectives on Promotional Culture*. NEW YORK: PETER LANG. [2010]
- COULDRY, N., «Reality television, or the secret theatre of neoliberalism». *REVIEW OF EDUCATION PEDAGOGY AND CULTURAL STUDIES*, 30(1): 3–13. [2008]
- DI, M., «Between Propaganda and Commercials, Chinese TV today» in Shirk S. *Changing Media, Changing China*. OXFORD: OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, PP. 91-114. [2010]
- HEPP, A. AND COULDRY, N., «What should comparative media research be comparing? Towards a transcultural approach to ‘media cultures», in Thussu, D. (ed.) *INTERNATIONALIZING MEDIA STUDIES*. ROUTLEDGE. [2009]
- HILL, A., «Big Brother. The Real Audience.» *Television and New Media*, 3(3): 323–340. [2002]
- HOLMES, S., «Reality Goes Pop!»: Reality TV, Popular Music, and Narratives of Stardom in Pop Idol». *TELEVISION AND NEW MEDIA*, 5(2): 147-172. [2004]
- KEANE, M. FUNG, A. AND MORAN A., «New Television, Globalisation, and the East Asian Cultural Imagination». HONG KONG: HONG KONG UNIVERSITY PRESS. [2007]
- KRAIDY, M., «Reality Television, Gender and Authenticity in Saudi Arabia». *JOURNAL OF COMMUNICATION*, 59(2): 345-366. [2009]
- KRAIDY, M. AND SENDER, K., «The Politics of Reality TV». LONDON: ROUTLEDGE. [2011]
- JENKINS, H., «Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture». NEW YORK: NYU PRESS. [2006]
- JIAN M. AND LIU, C., «‘Democratic entertainment’ commodity and unpaid labor of reality TV: a preliminary analysis of China’s Supergirl». *INTER-ASIA CULTURAL STUDIES*, 10(4): 524-543. [2009]
- JOFFE-WALT, B., «Mad about the girl: a pop idol for China». *THE GUARDIAN*. [HTTP://WWW.THEGUARDIAN.COM/MEDIA/2005/OCT/07/CHINATHEMEDIA.BROADCASTING](http://www.theguardian.com/media/2005/oct/07/chinathemedia.broadcasting). LAST ACCESSED: APRIL 10TH, 2016. [2005]
- MARTEL, F., «Mainstream». PARIS: FLAMMARION. [2010]

- MORAN, A., «TV Formats Worldwide». Intellect. [2009]
- MURRAY, S. AND OUELLETTE, L. (eds.), «Reality Television. Remaking Television Culture». NEW YORK: NYU PRESS. [2004]
- PUNATHAMBEKAR, A., «Reality TV and Participatory Culture in India». POPULAR COMMUNICATION, 8(4): 241 – 255 [2010]
- RAJAGOPAL, A., «Politics After Television». CAMBRIDGE: CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS. [2001]
- RAJAGOPAL, A., «Television in India: Ideas, Institutions and Practices» in Alvarado, M. ET AL., THE SAGE HANDBOOK OF TELEVISION STUDIES. THOUSAND OAKS: SAGE. [2015]
- TAY, J., «The Search for an Asian Idol: The Performance of Regional Identity in Reality Television». INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CULTURAL STUDIES, 14(3): 323-338. [2011]
- THUSSU, D., «Mapping Global Media Flow and Contra-Flow» in Thussu D.K, International Communication. LONDON: ROUTLEDGE. [2010]
- TURNER, G., «The mass production of celebrity: ‘Celetoids’, reality television and the ‘demotic turn’». INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CULTURAL STUDIES, 9(2): 153–65. [2006]
- VAN ZONEN, LISBET, «Imagining the fan democracy». EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF COMMUNICATION 19(1): 39–52 [2004]
- WHEELOCK STAHL, M., «A moment like this. American Idol and narratives of meritocracy», in C. Washburne and M. Derno (eds.), Bad Music: The Music We Love to Hate. NEW YORK: ROUTLEDGE, PP. 165–82. [2004]
- WONG, E. , «China TV Grows Racy, and Gets a Chaperon». The New York Times, [HTTP://WWW.NYTIMES.COM/2012/01/01/WORLD/ASIA/CENSORS-PULL-REINS-AS-CHINA-TV-CHASING-PROFIT-GETS-RACY.HTML?_R=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/01/world/asia/censors-pull-reins-as-china-tv-chasing-profit-gets-racy.html?_r=0). LAST ACCESSED: APRIL 10TH, 2016. [2011]