

The international extent and elasticity of lifestyle television

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Abstract

This article takes a production perspective on lifestyle programming, a relatively new genre within television entertainment. The lifestyle genre has its historical roots in factual programming genres of the didactic sort but its contemporary, entertainment-skewed version is generally thought to have originated in the 1990s in the United Kingdom, from where it has spread internationally, predominantly to the Anglophone and Northern European countries. Another particularity of the genre is that lifestyle programs are increasingly traded internationally as program formats, which are subsequently adapted locally to meet national market conditions outside their country of origin and, hence, form a new, different and highly internationalised business and production model within international television. Nonetheless, the genre seems tremendously elastic and the same lifestyle formats are often produced very differently from country to country according to the media systemic conditions of specific local markets. The article starts off by investigating the international extent of the genre and looks into possible explanations for its Anglophone and Northern European bias. Subsequently, it examines the great elasticity of the genre by analysing the Australian and Danish versions of The block, which will demonstrate precisely how the genre is adapted radically differently to suit two diverse broadcasters and their diverse conditions in two different national markets shaped by varying competitive conditions, media policies and broadcasting histories. Lastly, the article argues that national culture offers only a small part of the explanation for the local differences, and that investigating the specific media systemic conditions that shape local production gives us a more detailed and comprehensive explanation and understanding of the differences.

Introduction

This article takes a *production* perspective on lifestyle programming, a relatively new genre within television entertainment. The lifestyle genre has its historical roots in *factual* programming genres of the didactic sort but its contemporary, entertainment-skewed version is generally thought to have originated in the 1990s in the United Kingdom, from where it has spread internationally, predominantly to the Anglophone and Northern European countries. Another particularity of the genre is that lifestyle programs are increasingly traded internationally as program *formats*, which are subsequently adapted locally to meet national market conditions outside their country of origin and, hence, form a new, different and highly internationalised business and production model

within international television. Nonetheless, the genre seems tremendously elastic and the same lifestyle formats are often produced very differently from country to country according to the media systemic conditions of specific local markets.

The article starts off by investigating the international extent of the genre and looks into possible explanations for its Anglophone and Northern European bias. Subsequently, it examines the great elasticity of the genre by analysing the Australian and Danish versions of *The block*, which will demonstrate precisely how the genre is adapted radically differently to suit two diverse broadcasters and their diverse conditions in two different national markets shaped by varying competitive conditions, media policies and broadcasting histories. Lastly, the article argues that national culture offers only a small part of the explanation for the local differences, and that investigating the specific media systemic conditions that shape local production gives us a more detailed and comprehensive explanation and understanding of the differences.

Lifestyle: a Northern European and Anglophone phenomenon

Lifestyle television deals with ordinary people's everyday lives. The genre includes programs on interior design and home improvement, personal makeover, food and, more recently, personal coaching on issues such as cleaning. The programs revolve around everyday life and the surfaces, routines and behaviour of our *private sphere*, particularly the *physical* organisation of the private sphere. The genre, together with reality, falls into the *factual entertainment* category, and programs are most often didactical at their core and give practical advice and inspiration on food, fashion, body, garden and house, all of which are phenomena through which we express and develop our identities.

The lifestyle genre mainly exists in Northern Europe and the Anglophone countries. The table below is based on Schmitt et al.'s (2005) report on the format trade in thirteen Western countries. It shows how much money and time were spent on program formats *broadcast* in the thirteen countries within the lifestyle genre, divided into the two subgenres of "home improvement" and "makeover", in the three-year period 2002–2004.

The table not surprisingly reveals that the three largest format exporters among the thirteen countries—that is, the United Kingdom, the United States of America and the Netherlands—all have high levels of lifestyle formats. Nevertheless, relative to market size, the Scandinavian markets together with Australia also have a large amount of lifestyle format hours within both subgenres, whereas the Southern European countries of France, Italy and Spain together with Poland have none or very few lifestyle formats. Hence, if the extent of lifestyle *formats* is anything to judge by, the same would most likely be the case for the overall extent of lifestyle programs, including not only formats but also lifestyle programs produced exclusively for local markets. That is, a high level of lifestyle formats in a country is likely to be a reflection of an overall high level of the genre in the television schedules of that country.

Table 1 Format production spend and format hours broadcast in the lifestyle subgenres of “home improvement” and “makeover” in 2002–2004 according to country

	Home improvement	Makeover	Total
USA	27,487,000 € 56.5 hrs	71,316,000 € 144 hrs	98,803,000 € 200.6 hrs
Netherlands	9,805,000 € 125.4 hrs	572,000 € 7.6 hrs	10,377,000 € 133 hrs
United Kingdom	15,655,000 € 66.5 hrs	5,119,000 € 26 hrs	20,775,000 € 92.5 hrs
Australia	5,331,000 € 81.5 hrs	750,000 € 7.5 hrs	6,081,000 € 89 hrs
Denmark	1,260,000 € 18 hrs	1,820,000 € 26 hrs	3,080,000 € 44 hrs
Germany	5,224,000 € 33 hrs	1,800,000 € 10 hrs	7,024,000 € 43 hrs
Norway	1,324,000 € 19 hrs	1,283,000 € 18.3 hrs	2,607,000 € 37.3 hrs
Sweden	1,050,000 € 15 hrs	1,232,000 € 17.6 hrs	2,282,000 € 32.6 hrs
Belgium	980,000 € 14 hrs	834,000 € 11.9 hrs	1,814,000 € 25.9 hrs
France	-	1,360,000 € 8 hrs	1,360,000 € 8 hrs
Italy	227,000 € 3.3 hrs	-	227,000 € 3.3 hrs
Spain	-	-	-
Poland	-	-	-

Source: Schmitt et al. (2005)

But why does lifestyle seem to be a Northern European and Anglophone phenomenon? First of all, as Cunningham et al. (1998; also see Sinclair et al., 1996) have pointed to, the Anglophone countries together with especially the Northern European countries, where English is an important second language, constitute one so-called “geo-linguistic regions” out of a number of other geo-linguistic regions, within which television content is exchanged on a much larger scale than between geo-linguistic regions. Other examples of such regions that share a linguistic and most often a geographic and/or cultural historical proximity are the Arab countries, the “Latin” countries (including Italy, Portugal, Spain, France and South and Central America), or South East Asia. This means that common linguistic, cultural and historical roots and influences somehow continue to play a role on today’s television screens when it comes to, for example, the genres viewers are exposed to. These regions all have a centre–periphery structure, in which one or two countries are

net exporters and the remaining countries net importers. In the case of the Anglophone and Northern European region, the net exporters or market leaders are of course the United States of America, followed by the United Kingdom. The most obvious consequence of this in the Northern European television systems is that these systems—also when it comes to the Scandinavian taste for the lifestyle genre—have historically found much of their televisual inspiration in especially the United Kingdom, which is also where the contemporary lifestyle genre is thought to have originated (Brunsdon et al., 2001).

Nevertheless, there are also other potential explanations to do with socio-cultural movements and media systemic conditions within precisely these Northern European and Anglophone countries. As far as socio-cultural influences are concerned, these countries are undoubtedly among the wealthiest countries even in the wealthy Western world and have all experienced a recent real estate boom and low unemployment rates. Most likely the affluence and low unemployment combined with a real estate “gold rush” have created an unprecedented interest in areas pertaining to lifestyle, including home improvement and renovation, personal makeover, food, interior design, gardening etc., which in turn is reflected on our television screens. In less wealthy countries, these areas may have a lower priority for viewers and thus be of no interest to broadcasters.

Another socio-cultural explanation may very well be found in varying “entertaining cultures”, which are in part influenced by climate. In the colder Northern Europe, people entertain guests in their own homes. That is, the prevailing entertaining culture is “indoor”, in contrast to the Southern European entertaining culture, which takes place predominantly outside the home in bars, cafes and restaurants and, thus, could be termed “outdoor”. This in turn may very well have a bearing on the importance of the appearance of one’s home and everything pertaining to it, making it more important in Northern Europe and the Anglophone countries.¹ Having said this, it could also be that the lifestyle genre is just delayed in the countries at the bottom of the table. It may very well be that the genre will also prevail here if and when the right conditions exist—when countries such as Poland, Italy and Spain reach the same level of wealth as the countries at the top, or when they experience the effects of a property boom similar to that in the Anglophone and Northern European countries. The fact that both France and Italy have broadcast a few hours of lifestyle formats may support this theory.

As for explanations found in particular media systemic conditions, one can point to the fact that the Northern European countries have traditionally had, and in some countries such as the Scandinavian countries continue to have, a strong public service tradition (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Bruhn Jensen, 1997; 2003; Søndergaard, 2006). This tradition has always had as its remit some sort of education of its viewers. Modern lifestyle programming fits in perfectly with this tradition, as it at least in theory educates viewers on how to go about their everyday lives (see for example Carlsen & Frandsen, 2005 for a detailed account of the genre’s development in Denmark).

¹ Australia with its warm climate and predominantly outdoor entertaining culture is an exemption to this rule. However, the fact that Australia has a very strong cultural and historical affiliation with especially the United Kingdom may explain why the country’s broadcasters are still very keen on lifestyle television.

The elasticity of the lifestyle genre: *The block* and *Huset*

Despite a number of general and overarching socio-cultural and media systemic similarities, on a less generalised level there are also many important differences between, on one hand, the countries with high levels of lifestyle programming and, on the other, the specific broadcasters between and within these “high level lifestyle” markets. In fact, according to Hallin and Mancini (2004), the Northern European countries constitute one prototypical media system model—the democratic–corporatist model—whereas the Anglophone countries constitute another and in many aspects differing model—the liberal model. As for television broadcasting, these differences come to the fore in the fact that television is more commercialised and liberalised in the Anglophone countries, whereas commercialisation and liberalisation are less dominant in Northern Europe, where for example, and as already mentioned, public service broadcasting continues to play a prominent role (see also Jensen, 2007). In addition, it is important to note that the specific broadcasters both between and within these countries exhibit large dissimilarities. Some broadcasters for example operate under a public service remit and as such are much more regulated compared with commercial and privately-owned broadcasters, and in certain countries commercial players are regulated more vigorously than in others. Additionally, some channels cater primarily for niche audiences as opposed to being providers of full-scale services.

Nevertheless, the lifestyle genre is flexible enough to embrace the many differences and somehow fit into a large variety of broadcasters, channels and media systemic conditions, and it is to this genre elasticity we now turn by comparing the Australian and Danish versions of *The block*. The format was originally developed in Australia in 2003 for commercial network Channel Nine and format rights have been sold to a number of Northern European and Anglophone countries such as Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Finland, Germany, Netherlands and the United Kingdom. Independent production company Metronome undertook the Danish adaptation, *Huset*, for the commercial station PSB TV 2. Both countries have aired two series of the format, and for the analysis carried out here I have chosen episode one of the second series in both countries, as this is where the narrative and competitive plot is struck and the competing couples are introduced. As such, first episodes are easier to compare than later episodes, where the Danish and Australian narratives take different directions.

In the format, four couples are chosen to renovate an apartment each in the same block, hence the show’s original title. The couples have a limited period of time and budget to do so, and, to put further pressure on the couples, everybody must maintain their daytime jobs during the renovation. Furthermore, the apartments are in a fairly bad condition, which means that the work includes a number of expensive, difficult, and time-consuming tasks, such as full bathroom and kitchen renovations. The competitors’ overriding goal during the series is to make the best, most popular renovation. In the Australian series “best and most popular” means the apartment that in the last episode sells for the highest price at an auction. In the Danish series it means the apartment the viewers like the best. The Australian couples all get to keep any profits they may make at the final auction but the couple that get the highest price will receive double their profit as a prize. The Danish couples compete for a cash prize of DKK 500,000—that is, only one couple is rewarded

with a fixed cash prize. Everybody else walks away empty-handed.² On the whole the format contains equal shares of reality and lifestyle elements and therefore abundant possibilities to combine and play with the two genres. So, let us first explore the two genres and their differences.

The lifestyle and reality genres compared

As mentioned, the lifestyle genre clearly shares traits with the *reality* genre, the most important of which is the fact that they both have ordinary people in their private sphere as their dramaturgical pivotal point. However, the two also demonstrate many differences, which may be summed up by classifying lifestyle as harmless small-talk television with a focus on ordinary everyday experiences such interior decorating and gardening, and reality as a kind of “peak realism” (Jerslev, 2005, p. 28, my translation from the Danish “højdepunktsrealisme”) exclusively focusing on the *extraordinary* events of ordinary people. The reality genre deals with ordinary people experiencing an emotional break-up of the everyday and happens when the everyday breaks out of its routine and becomes dangerous and exciting. As such, the genre contains a built-in guarantee of crisis and often involves contestants’ loss of face—for example, when contestants on *Survivor* must live off a bowl of rice a day and form strategic but callous allegiances, or when *X Factor* contestants give it all they have on stage but still receive harsh criticism from the judges. Thus, reality nearly always involves the exposure of less flattering aspects of human behaviour and emotions. On the other hand, a lifestyle program rarely involves participants’ loss of face, although participants publicly expose private feelings (especially in the “reveal”). In lifestyle we never get too close. Everybody has a good time and the façade remains intact.³

In summary, lifestyle programs are games of *inclusion* in which everybody participates on equal terms, and where there are no obvious winners and losers. Reality shows, on the other hand, are games of *exclusion* with real winners and losers, and which emphasise an exclusive individuality in their contestants. As a matter of fact, and as Bruun (2005) has pointed out, these differences make up two very distinct types of entertainment, where lifestyle is *egalitarian* and inclusive and reality *elitist* and exclusive. However, we shall return to this in a little more detail after an analytical comparison of the Danish and Australian versions of *The block*.

The block and Huset compared

The block and *Huset* are radically different and this has a lot to do with how the two versions choose to combine the two genres and ultimately shows the great elasticity of the lifestyle genre. The Australian version makes maximum use of the reality elements contained in the format, with large emphasis on conflicts, scandal, emotional drama and competitiveness, and relatively little emphasis on the lifestyle elements, all of which essentially makes it highly *melodramatic*. The Danish version, on the other hand, is less reality-skewed and seems to play down conflicts and the built-in competitive elements.

² In Denmark houses and apartments are not sold at auctions. Nevertheless, the first series of *Huset* tried the auction model but failed miserably. No bidders attended the auction, which was telecast live, and the company who had originally sold the apartments to TV 2 had to buy the apartments back without any competition from others. The result was a complete anti-climax and the auction model was subsequently abandoned in the second series (Nikolajsen, 2006).

³ See Jensen (2007, pp. 75ff) for a more detailed comparison of the two genres.

As a consequence, *Huset* puts its emphasis on the “fun” of renovating and on the creation of a communal feeling among the competing couples. Having said this, *Huset* still contains many reality elements and actually only a few lifestyle elements. It may therefore be classified as “reality light” meets “lifestyle light” and ultimately comes across as much more *documentaristic*. Also, the two adaptations have very different narrative guiding principles in the sense that *Huset* has an overriding narrative focus on egalitarian principles such as “ordinariness”, “plainness”, and viewer recognition (“I could achieve that look”), whereas *The block* has its narrative focus on elitist principles such as “extraordinariness”, “abnormality”, and “oddness”. All of this will be elaborated below by comparing a number of key constituents of the format, including program introductions and finales, the state of the apartments, and casting. These are all vital areas in which the two adaptations differ considerably, and we look at how they differ with regard to viewer contact and appeal, the use of competitive elements, the use of do-it-yourself (DIY) and other informative elements, and the use of the reality genre.

Casting: Australian extraordinariness versus Danish ordinariness

There are considerable differences between the Australian and the Danish couples in four areas: age, looks, sexual orientation, and competitiveness. The couples on *The block* are all gorgeous and glamorous people in their twenties and thirties, most of them with well-paid jobs and big city lives lived in the fast lane. They are certainly not your average Australians and would no doubt all look spectacular, scantily clad on the cover of a magazine—which, of course, is where they wound up as a result of the publishing deal with an Australian weekly magazine. Besides this, one of the couples is gay, which is just another example of what one might call the “casting of the extraordinary” strategy that has clearly been employed by the producers. In addition, all four couples are very competitive and emphasise that they are in *The block* to win. Contrary to the Australians, the Danish contestants are fairly average in terms of jobs, looks, sexual orientation and age. In the first episode, none of the couples so much as mentions the competition and the possibility of winning half a million DKK. Instead, they talk about the challenges that lie ahead for them as couples. Another characteristic of this “casting of the ordinary” strategy is the large variety of ages—the youngest contestant is 26-years-old, the oldest 62—in contrast to the Australian version’s exclusive focus on the young.

If we quite reasonably assume that the average Australian viewer is not nearly as gorgeous, glamorous and successful as the couples on *The block*, but rather a typical heterosexual Australian with a normal job and a standard, run-of-the-mill partner, the casting is likely to have a high *fascination* potential with viewers. The fascinating lifestyles, personalities, and looks of the couples are likely to provoke dreams and envy and perhaps even disgust and antipathy, as the viewers either wish they were like the contestants or dislike them for being so competitive, glamorous, and gorgeous and so different from themselves. This becomes particularly evident in the decision to cast the gay couple, which is likely to cause some sort of controversy, scandal, amusement and/or offence with the average viewer. The Danish couples are much closer to the average viewer than is the case with the Australians. It is likely that Danish viewers will find some sort of *identification* with one or more of the contestants, either when it comes to occupation, age, geographical origin, vernacular, relationship, or looks. So even though the couples are actually fairly different, they are different in an ordinary, average way, and each couple thus personifies one standard Danish lifestyle among other standard lifestyles.

Conflict versus team-building

Both the Australian and Danish first episodes take the viewers through the first day on *The block* and *Huset*. That is, the plot and the four couples are introduced, the couples see the apartments and meet each other for the first time, get their first assignment, and start work on the renovation. Nonetheless, the first day progresses very differently in the two versions. The first day on *The block* is filled with drama, scandal, emotion and interpersonal conflict, whereas the first day on *Huset* focuses on the fun of renovating, team-building and interpersonal bonding. Again, the differences between the two adaptations centre very much on the Australian extraordinariness versus the Danish ordinariness, both when it comes to the state of the apartments, the competitive elements, and the different use of reality and lifestyle elements in the two adaptations.

State of the apartments

There are obvious differences in the state of the apartments. The Australian apartments are in very bad shape. They are extremely dirty and have no floors or walls intact. There are too many room dividers and no plaster on the walls or ceilings. In addition, the floors have big holes through to the apartment downstairs, some of the toilets do not flush and the sewer pipes are exposed. This means that Dani and Monique can hear Steven and Richard going to the toilet and Kirsten and Jason can hear Matt and Jane talking privately. This naturally enhances the potential for conflict. For example, dust falls from the ceiling in Dani and Monique's apartment when Richard and Steven clean, and Kirsten and Jason can hear when Matt and Jane talk about the other couples—including Kirsten and Jason—behind their backs. The glamorous and sophisticated couples are literally trapped in the dirt! That the apartments are in such a bad state exposes the high social status and glamour of the Australian couples even more and their extraordinariness becomes even more obvious. In this sense, the viewers are given an opportunity to laugh at the contestants and perhaps gloat a little over the fact that these chic and classy people are caught in a very unsophisticated situation.

The Danish apartments are in bad shape as well, although they are nowhere near the poor condition of the Australian apartments. Cords are hanging from the ceiling, taps are dripping and everywhere is filthy but the walls, ceiling and floors are fairly intact and the rooms are already laid out. Even though the Danish couples are initially a bit horrified by the state of the apartments, they all manage to stay quite positive throughout the episode. Unlike in *The block*, in the first episode of *Huset* there is no emphasis put on the conflict that may arise from the bad state of the apartments. Instead the similarities of the apartments—and thus fairness of the competition—are emphasised. The host makes a point of informing the viewers that, even though the apartments differ a little, the four apartments have the same size and are in “equally bad shape”. Hence, the ordinariness can also be found in the apartments. Their state is not too bad; they just need to be redecorated with some tender loving care. Additionally, and in contrast to the Australian version, the Danish couples do not have to clean the apartments on the first day. Instead their first assignment is to build a communal workshop in collaboration with the other couples.

Competitive elements

This brings us to the competitive elements of the two adaptations. The communal workshop assignment mentioned above is a good example of how the Danish adaptation focuses on “lighter” or “softer” competitive elements that do not necessarily augment

conflict between and within the couples but rather enhance the interpersonal bonding among the contestants—the couples have six hours to build a communal workshop. Everybody has changed into similar work clothes: grey pants and white T-shirts. The women have a little disagreement over the wall colour, and Christian cannot work out how to assemble one of the power tools. However, the women quickly reach a civilised agreement, and Jørn helps Christian. As such, the workshop is generally built in a feel-good atmosphere. After the conclusion of this first assignment, the couples are even treated to a communal barbecue as a reward for a hard day's work. Additionally, another feel-good surprise awaits the couples when they go to bed: the producers have had the couples' private beds transported to *Huset* complete with duvets, pillows, and bed spreads.

In stark contrast to the downplaying of the competitive elements on *Huset*, from the beginning *The block* places a large emphasis on the competition between the couples. Before even entering the apartments, the four Australian couples have to compete against each other to decide which couple gets which apartment. The host tells them to rush to four differently coloured Toyota four-wheel drives. Inside each car is a key with number 1, 2, 3 or 4 and this number decides who gets the first, second, third and fourth pick of the apartments. The four apartments differ considerably from one another. Two of them have gardens, and another has an extra room. In the Danish version, the allocation of the apartments takes place by the couples simply drawing lots. Furthermore, the Australian audience can enter a “people's choice awards” competition where they have to vote for the most popular couple. At the end of the series, the most popular couple will be announced and among the people who voted for that couple there is a draw to win a car similar to the one the couples have just received. Furthermore, the competition adds to the general feeling of conflict in the Australian series. It is basically a popularity contest that asks the viewers to take an active stance on the conflicts brewing on *The block*.

The Danish viewers of *Huset* are also asked to vote for their favourites. Actually it is the viewers who, by SMS or telephone, almost exclusively decide which couple wins both the main competition and the sub-competitions. However, unlike the Australian audience, the Danish audience is asked to pick their favourite *renovation* and not their favourite couple. Even though one's favourite renovation may very well belong to one's favourite couple, it still focuses attention on the actual renovation and not on the personalities of the contestants. The Danish viewers are not asked to judge the personalities of the contestants, but rather the contestants' DIY skills and creativity.

Melodrama versus docudrama

Reality elements

The two adaptations also differ when it comes to the use of elements from the reality subgenres. *The block* has a melodramatic narrative resembling that of the fictional soap genre and of the reality subgenres, whereas *Huset's* narrative is much more docu-dramatic, realistic and, hence, ordinary. Reality focuses precisely on the extraordinary situations and events in “ordinary” people's lives and often employs a melodramatic narrative (Jensen, 2007; Jerslev, 2004; Turner, 2005), which again fits well with the analytical findings until now. This means that *The block* creates its narrative progress using elements from fiction, whereas *Huset* plays on elements from the documentary genre and plays down the potential melodrama. This is best exemplified in the two first episode finales.

The Australian version's first episode finale consists of a teaser of what will happen within the next two weeks on *The block*. The teaser hints that there will be lots of future conflicts in the form of contestants clashing with each other and creates a fantastic cliff-hanger that is sure to make the audience curious and titillated. The teaser hints at a growing conflict between Jason and Kirsten and the other couples. At the end of the teaser, a new and even more scandalous conflict is hinted at: the press has got wind of the fact that one contestant has been in jail. The contestant, Dani, is being interviewed saying that he has served his punishment already and that he only took the blame for somebody else. To make things worse, Dani's partner Monique's grandfather dies the day after the reveal. There are lots of tears and emotion, and you see Monique packing a suitcase and wonder if they will be leaving the show. This last segment, centred on the revelation of Dani's criminal past in the press, shows how *The block* explicitly involves the contestants' personal lives in creating a melodramatic narrative very similar to that of a fictional soap: his past catches up with him; his loving family façade cracks; and we are there to watch as it happens.

The episode finale of *Huset* employs a different tactic, focusing on the creation of a feel-good atmosphere among the contestants. In a classic documentary-like approach, all four couples are interviewed to camera stating that they have had a great, fun-filled day, and everybody likes everybody. Everybody also seems quite hopeful about the renovation task ahead. After this, the host gives them their first renovation assignment. The bedroom must be finished within a week. The couples subsequently go to their apartments where their own beds await them and lights are turned off in the apartments. However, at 3am Christian and Ulla still cannot sleep and decide to do something about the cooker hood above the stove instead, which results in them short-circuiting the electricity of the entire apartment. That is, there is not a trace of conflict in sight, only plenty of feel-good vibes through and through with a funny and silly "gag" at the very end. In contrast to the first Australian episode, there are no melodramatic cliffhangers hinting at conflicts galore and revealing what will happen next.

As it turns out there is a pragmatic explanation for the absence of cliffhangers about what will happen next in the Danish version. Due to the viewers deciding the outcome of the competitions, *Huset* was broadcast "quasi live", meaning that production was done very close to broadcast and consequently the renovation happened as the series was broadcast. Obviously the producers therefore had no idea what would happen the next week or the week after, and hence could not make a cliffhanger similar to the Australian one (Nikolajsen, 2006). This also meant that a comparatively large part of each episode had to be dedicated to the SMS competition and therefore left less time to develop the main storylines around the relationships of the couples (Nikolajsen, 2006).⁴

DIY elements

Neither the Danish nor the Australian first episode contains a lot of DIY or other informative elements. As already mentioned, the focus in both episodes is on the plot, the contestants and their initial reactions. Nevertheless, whilst the informative elements on *The block* are practically absent, they play a slightly larger role on *Huset*. This becomes

⁴ Nikolajsen (2006) also points to a smaller budget as an important explanation for the differences between *Huset* and *The Block*. Metronome may not have had the possibility to hire as much staff as would have been required to obtain a level of detail similar to the Australian original. However, as none of the executive producers involved in either adaptation wanted to disclose exact budgets, this cannot be verified.

most evident in the Danish couples' first communal assignment, the building of the workshop. Also, the informative elements' relative absence in episode one of *Huset* is clearly made up for in its sister program *Huset direkte* that follows directly after the main program. As is evident from the title, it is a studio-based program broadcast live immediately after the conclusion of episode one. It contains various informative segments on renovating in general and on episode one specifically. The show starts off with a story on shoddy construction work and gives advice to viewers on what precautions to take to avoid shoddy tradespeople. There is also a story about the Danes' relationship with the "workshop" seen from a historical and sociological perspective. Also, an historian explains the history of the apartment block, and finally an interior designer gives advice on how to decorate a bedroom. As the lifestyle genre (as opposed to the contentious reality genre) is generally acknowledged as being acceptable within public service circles and actually forms part of a long public service tradition of useful programming (Carlsen & Frandsen, 2005), *Huset direkte* obviously serves a dual purpose. By giving the viewers lots of information, it also serves as a political "public service justification". Because *Huset* has very little DIY and other informative elements, *Huset direkte* is more or less the only reason the executive producer of *Huset* can call it lifestyle—or "everyday documentary"—rather than reality (Rømer, 2006). Also, it is yet another way of "normalising" what happens in *Huset* and making it relevant for the ordinary viewer.

Elitist versus egalitarian entertainment

In essence and to use a single comparison: the Australians renovate in Armani jeans and high heels and every couple gets their own tools; the Danes renovate wearing similar and practical work clothes and they have to share the tools provided in the communal workshop. Here, there is a clear parallel to Bruun (2005) and her theories on egalitarian and elitist television entertainment. Aided by its melodramatic style, the Australian adaptation clearly has an elitist bias, focusing on the narrative principles of extraordinariness, abnormality and oddness, whereas *Huset's* documentaristic style supports an egalitarian bias with narrative principles such as ordinariness, plainness and viewer recognisability at its core. Consequently, the Australian version is exclusive and elitist at its core, exemplified in the casting and conflicting competitiveness, whereas the Danish version is much more inclusive and egalitarian, exemplified in the down-playing of conflict and episode one's construction of a general feel-good ambience.

Australian commercial versus Danish public service television

Many of the reasons for the exclusive focus on the normal and the ordinary in the Danish TV 2 adaptation—as opposed to the original Channel Nine version's extraordinariness—are likely to be found in the two broadcasters' positions in the Danish and Australian television system, respectively. It is likely that even though *The block* most probably had a larger budget than *Huset*—and therefore better financial opportunities to create a more spectacular and extraordinary narrative—a large part of the explanation must pertain to the fact that *Huset* is adapted by a broadcaster with a public service remit, while privately-owned commercial broadcaster Channel Nine did the original version. This is substantiated by the fact that similar analytical differences are at play in the Australian and Danish versions of the format *Ground force* (*Hokus krokus* in Danish), which were also adapted by a privately-owned Australian broadcaster (Channel Seven) and a Danish public service broadcaster (DR1) (see Jensen, 2007 and 2005 for a detailed comparison of the two).

In fact, according to format developer David Barbour, *The block* was originally envisaged as a soap opera on the human drama that inevitably arises during renovation work (Barbour, 2006). Barbour wanted to take the focus away from the DIY aspect of the lifestyle shows and instead focus exclusively on the hardship in getting tradesmen to turn up on time, to organise a DIY renovation around one's work schedule etc. This notion corresponds perfectly with the prior analysis of *The block* and also illustrates my point about public service versus commercial broadcasting. A Danish public service broadcaster could never say that they wanted to take DIY out of a lifestyle program and make it into a reality show or soap! This would go against everything that is considered acceptable in the Danish public service tradition for lifestyle programming, whose primary justification is that it contains information relevant to viewers (Carlsen & Frandsen, 2005). On the other hand, the quote is perfectly legitimate for a privately-owned commercial broadcaster in Australia, whose primary responsibility is to attract (the right kind and number of) viewers.

It is precisely the more public service-oriented programming policy and basic programming values that TV 2's commissioning editor points to as the reason that the Danish adaptation looks different to its Australian predecessor. She characterises TV 2's core values as "inspirational" and "aspirational" and, as mentioned, she prefers to call *Huset* "lifestyle or everyday documentary" rather than reality (Rømer, 2006). The reason that she is opposed to the term reality is that the producers do not actively plant or cultivate conflict. Instead, they often play down conflicts, as the analysis has shown. Rømer believes that TV 2 viewers would be opposed to this harder, conflict-ridden approach. As TV 2 is commercially funded, despite its public service remit, the playing down of conflict in turn reflects the channel's competition with its closest commercial competitor, TV 3, in which TV 2 endeavours to ensure it does not look like TV 3, whose programming profile is dominated by precisely the harder, conflict-ridden reality shows such as *Survivor/Robinson ekspeditionen*. Hence, internal conflicts regarding renovation issues are acceptable, whereas conflicts between neighbours are not because these would bear too much similarity to TV 3's profile (Rømer, 2006).

Danish cultural distaste for conflict and competition?

Rømer also briefly touches upon what she calls "Danish culture" as an explanation as to why the Danish adaptation is less competitive, conflict-ridden and sensationalistic. She believes that Danes are less competitive than Australians, whom she sees as "highly competitive" (Rømer, 2006). She sees the Danes and thus Danish media as having less taste for sensation and scandal. According to her, these cultural differences come to the fore in the way TV 2 contestants are cast, avoiding people with the "slightest hint of mental imbalance" (Rømer, 2006).

However, contrary to what she suggests, this less extraordinary and more normal way of casting could also be related to the Danish public service tradition rather than to inherent traits in the Danish national character, especially because other, privately-owned Danish broadcasters such as TV 3 are certainly not shy when it comes to conflict and harder reality type shows.⁵ Public service television—or at least Rømer's and thus TV 2's interpretation hereof—may not offend viewers. It must gather the nation—not divide it, as might have been the case if TV 2 had cast people with a "hint of mental imbalance" or

⁵ See Jensen (2007) for comparative analyses of the Australian and Danish versions of the two formats *FC Zulu* and *Idol*. Here, I demonstrate how the Danish versions are more elitist than the Australian versions.

extraordinarily gorgeous, glamorous, and competitive people, for that matter. The executive producer of *Huset* indirectly points to this as well, when he talks about the reasons *Huset* was different to the Australian original (Nikolajsen, 2006). While his team deliberately chose “relations over renovations” and therefore had to employ “a few reality tricks along the way”, the reality elements had to be “cosy and positive” and in line with TV 2’s programming policy and values as opposed to “nasty” and conflict-ridden (Nikolajsen, 2006). An example of a positive reality trick is making the contestants believe they have to sleep in uncomfortable lounge beds, after which the producers have their private beds brought to *Huset*.

In this respect, it is interesting that the other Danish PSB DR recently adapted British talent show *Xfactor*, with an overwhelming ratings success as a result, despite the fact that this format—including DR’s adaptation of it—is widely seen as an example of just this type of nastier, conflict-ridden and reality-skewed entertainment program. This consequently suggests that Danes, contrary to what Rømer believes, do not oppose a more elitist and exclusive type of programming. Rather, it suggests that other explanations are most likely at play here, and it is this article’s argument that these explanations are found within the media system itself and the people acting in it, and that they have to do with conditions such as national broadcasting history, pervasive industry ideologies and changing competitive situations. This argument is elaborated below in a final discussion and comparison to previous academic works on the subject of transnational differences in television usage and content.

Conclusions

A significant number of media scholars have worked with cross-cultural differences in media content and usage and have, in the process, often explained differences in content with differences in national culture. Below are four examples of such academic contributions, two of which deal with general differences in the employment of a certain genre, and the remaining two deal specifically with format adaptations. In a study on how television viewers around the world respond to news programs, Bruhn Jensen (1998, pp. 164ff) identifies two types of “correlated cultures”—“cultures of crisis” and “cultures of stability”—within which viewers share similar responses to news and consequently explains the similarities within the correlated cultures with the fact that they share similar “cultural and national-political contexts”. When it comes to another highly internationalised genre, the game show, Cooper-Chen (2005; 1994) points out four “cultural continents” (the Western, East Asian, Latin and Equatorial) by examining game shows in fifty countries. Within these regions, local television tastes seem to converge and only a few game show formats have crossed into another region. If we look more specifically at concrete format adaptation studies, Skovmand (1992, pp. 98-99) also views the differences between the local Danish, American, German and pan-Scandinavian versions of *Wheel of fortune* as representative of the four local cultures, as does Moran (1998, pp. 74ff) in his comparative analyses of Dutch, German and Australian versions of the same scripted fiction formats. National culture undoubtedly plays a part. Nonetheless, my argument is that looking into specific media systemic conditions of the local adapting broadcasters provides us with more detailed and comprehensive explanations for similarities and differences in local adaptations of the same formats.

This article’s argument is that a program similar to the Australian *The block* could actually have been produced and broadcast successfully in Denmark, also on a public service broadcaster, had the right media systemic conditions existed (which they may soon do).

Let us explain by delving into one of the main dichotomies between the two versions: the melodrama of *The block* as opposed to the docudrama of *Huset*. According to Jensen (2007; 2005) this actually seems to be a general dichotomy between Australian and Danish adaptations of other lifestyle and reality formats. A melodramatic taste apparently transcends both Australian public service and commercial broadcasters and would thus indicate an Australian national, cultural preference for melodrama, as opposed to a more matter-of-fact documentary-style Danish preference. However, if we look into Australian broadcasting history, which has always been dominated by commercial networks, we find a long-running tradition of soap opera, a genre characterised by melodrama and emotional over-dramatisation. Hence, employing a melodramatic narrative to a lifestyle program would probably be second nature to producers. In Denmark, the soap genre has never been an intrinsic part of schedules, and the reason for this can most likely be found in the historical and present dominance of public service broadcasting. In contrast to soap opera, with its roots in lowbrow cultural phenomena such as romance novels, Danish television's drama production has its roots in highbrow classical theatre and literature and this may very well still be reflected in today's Danish schedules and production practices. Despite the fact that Danish public service broadcasters have indeed, and with great international acclaim and success, embraced *televisual* fiction genres, it has mainly happened within higher-end genres such as crime and historical drama.

As romance novels and the like are as popular in Denmark as anywhere else, there is no reason why Danes should have a general cultural distaste for melodrama and prefer a documentaristic and "soberer" approach. On the contrary, it is most likely a reflection of a pervasive Danish public service interpretation of what viewers want, which in turn has been formed by a media policy that has historically and maybe even presently favoured a kind of public service broadcasting, which is still essentially *patriarchal* at its core (see Jensen 2007, pp. 147ff). As a consequence, Danish public service broadcasters and producers—maybe often unknowingly—continue to make programs with an apparent ethical stance on what is "best" for viewers. Nevertheless, with the recent success of DR's *X factor* adaptation in mind, this interpretation of public service may be changing.

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