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MTV Article

I want my MTV

Music Television in the age of localised globalisation

I sit there watching her. She is a picture of perfect youth and fitness as she moves around the gym, performing mind bending moves with a rather unnerving elasticity. I get up to put the kettle on. On my return, she has dressed in a school uniform and as I sip my coffee she is dancing up and down the corridor. Then suddenly she is gone, replaced by a rather annoying blonde talking to somebody from Leeds.

The blonde (surely dyed?) continues in her Geordie twang and starts to gabble her day to the unsuspecting victim on the phone. Then she too is gone, replaced by some bloke in a funny hat dancing around a white room. The furniture is moving round as well. The effect makes me dizzy. I sigh, wishing I was watching Britney again. This is MTV in 1999. Worse still, it's no American import. This is the MTV UK. And it's worrying.

Last night I managed to sit through the MTV Europe Music Awards from Dublin. It was excruciatingly painful. Ronan Keating hosted, Britney Spears cleaned up and one of the inconsequential members of Boyzone had a fight with Puff Daddy (sadly off screen). The whole event retained a kind of amateurism that should have made it seem endearing. Instead it was cringeworthy.

Thankfully it isn't always quite that bad. MTV isn't meant for me. Or at least the programme I'm watching now isn't. It's for those who love a bit of Steps, Mel C and Five; those who watch just before they sit down and do their homework. Yet MTV does care for me! They've got specialist shows now you know, even having a distinctly British show called 'Brand:New' playing the kind of indie and alternative that most Europeans have never heard of and quite a few Americans can't be bothered to understand.

The key point here is that MTV fully caters for all aspects of the UK audience. This suitability is largely due to MTV's policy of localisation. To most people, MTV seems like an international service straddling national boundaries ignoring class, education and any other aspects of localised culture that might stand in its way. The view of the MTV youth is one of Americanised bland homogeneity, a key consumer and at the same time a product of the internationalised 'global village'.

Yet again this is far from the truth. The company has a maxim regarding their policy of providing localised services, which is to 'think globally, act locally'. As the MTV press pack says: "each channel adheres to the overall style, programming, philosophy and integrity of the MTV trademark while promoting local cultural tastes and musical talent." In English? Well you see MTV is in fact very highly localised. There is a whole

amalgam of individual channels with different styles and tastes of which MTV in the UK and Ireland is just one. As part of this localisation MTV also broadcasts in many different languages as well.

In 1987 when MTV Europe started its broadcast across the continent to all territories including the UK. From 1996 on even this was subdivided, giving the UK and Ireland its own service as well as Germany, Italy and the Nordic Countries. The rest of Europe was given a rather loosely styled MTV 'Europe'.

You see MTV is about localisation because it works. MTV across Europe reaches a staggering 78 million homes. Owners Viacom have become one of the world's largest media conglomerates along with companies like Time Warner and News International. MTV is part of the family that brings you Paramount Films, Blockbuster Video and Nickelodeon and also happens to broadcast to a staggering 281.7 million homes in 79 territories worldwide.

The channel bounced onto American screens in 1981 to a new generation of couch potatoes in love with a new medium; the music video. The intent was clear; the first video it showed was the Buggles' 'Video Killed the Radio Star'. Ever since Queen had made the legendary Bohemian Rhapsody video in 1975 it had been clear that this new format had potential. MTV not only harnessed this fascination, it cultivated it to the extent that when Duran Duran appeared they felt obliged to capture the material world of the 1980's with a series of short film promos only matched on cost and depth by Michael Jackson's 'Thriller' opus in 1983. This video culture is MTV's bread and butter; but not everyone likes the same staple diet across the earth, and that is why a global network like MTV has to localise.

Yet channels like MTV did not catch onto this as early as they should have. The rate of competition for large-scale media players such as parent company Viacom is colossal. In order to retain their position they must continue to expand, and in recent years this has meant the cultivation of new market places in 'lesser developed', often poorer countries.

One such new market is India. In 1991 the government announced it was going to allow in foreign investment, previously impossible under the limiting economic structure. Around the same time, Rupert Murdoch's Star TV was starting to broadcast from Hong Kong. This powerful network had five channels -including the American version of MTV- and had a potential audience reach equal to two thirds of the world's population.

In India however, the services had limited appeal as television was expensive and the programming was in English and therefore limited to the educated middle class. Most of the Star TV services were also of very poor quality, an amalgamation of ancient BBC programming and repeats. Even so to many in the Indian working class the programming was stylish and its Western consumerism aspired to. However the potential problems can be seen from a quick look at India's demography. There are 16 regional languages with a total of 800 dialects. English is restricted to the urban elites that only make up around 27% of the population. 77% of this elite own televisions. (From *Global Television: Peripheral Vision*, edited by John Sinclair, Elizabeth Jacka and Stuart Cunningham and published by Oxford University Press.)

Yet MTV had its own problems. The American version of the channel presented the Indian people with a flood of completely alien images, and more importantly, sounds. Quite simply they didn't know what to make of it. Musical genres are not as universal as they might seem. Unfortunately MTV decided to do things by halves, initially creating an MTV to cover the whole of Asia. However they had to see the light when other, much more localised networks began.

One such network was India's Channel V which was far more reflective of India's culture, youth and language. MTV had no choice and gave India it's own channel. The network now broadcasts mostly local programming- including a Hindi talk show. For many shows it also uses a hybrid language- 'Hinglish'. This example shows that transplanting Western culture has limited workability. At the very least a 'local spin' must be put on content, be it linguistic or to do with musical differences.

You see the problem with MTV in the UK is that we British like Travis. We like the Stereophonics. We even like Steps (although I don't, naturally). As a general rule, Europe doesn't. In the early 1990's popular music in the British Isles was shifting. Rave culture had funnelled into crossover artists like the Prodigy and the Chemical Brothers, there was now a new moniker for UK artists, too; 'Britpop', an unwieldy term deriving from early stirrings from 'The Stone Roses' and 'Suede' and ending with a handful of albums released in 1994/5 by artists like Oasis, Blur and Pulp. It seems slightly unjust to compress the most important post-1960's musical era into a paragraph but the fact is that Europe rejected these distinctly British tastes and MTV was presented by a rapidly divided audience between the UK/Ireland and mainland Europe. Thus a split had to occur just as in Asia. as it latterly did in other parts of Europe.

Perhaps the most ironic thing about the new rather poor quality mainland 'Europe' channel (perhaps we expect more?) is that it is broadcast from studios next-door to the much slicker UK and Ireland version. What is even more bizarre is that this all takes place in studios at Camden Lock in London, in fact in the former home of ITV franchise victim TV-AM.

I finish off my coffee as I remiss about TV-AM and that big custard coloured sofa. What about Timmy Mallet eh? Apparently he's still going. Anne and Nick as well. Nick now presents the local BBC news in the Midlands you know. I always preferred them to Richard and Judy in the mornings myself. Richard and Judy just don't do it for me. I glance back at the screen as I choke on a Jaffa Cake. The Geordie girl, Donna, is now back on ranting about some shopping she got from Gucci. Very target audience.

Anyway where was I? Oh yes...it is slightly ironic that the past couple of years has seen an amalgamation between the respective music scenes again, mainly due to the more pop-orientated British charts and the Europe-wide success of acts like Boyzone, Britney Spears and the horror show that is the Spice Girls. Whilst it may be convenient to blame the Spice Girls for a downward spiral in the quality of British music tastes this it would also be a little churlish, since if it wasn't for them the British music industry would probably be largely in the doldrums by now.

What is most interesting about the relationship between MTV in the UK and Ireland and its mainland counterpart is that there are still vastly different groups of artists occupying the sphere of each channel. There are still the core 'bubblegum pop' acts such as the Spice Girls, Britney and the Backstreet Boys. There are the other artists with global appeal like Whitney Houston, Lauryn Hill and Madonna. But there is also a third set that is not necessarily nationally specific but is MTV-specific.

For example the German version of the channel has also resulted in specifically German language acts breaking there. This was shown by the list of artists nominated for the 'Best German Act' category as I sat paralysed by the MTV awards last night; I had not heard any of them, and that's not just down to my dislike of any of the artists or styles of music involved.

However this contrast between the UK and Europe is probably best demonstrated on the level of the differences between the residual MTV 'Europe' channel and MTV UK and Ireland. A staple artist of the mainland channel is a female vocalist called Anouk. She is phenomenally successful from The Netherlands to Finland. Ever heard of her? Thought not. I certainly hadn't before I boarded the cross channel ferry last year. Another act concerned is the band Skunk Anansie. Here in the UK they have a reasonably narrow (some might say 'indie') fan base, even though they usually receive good promotion from Radio 1 and MTV when they release a single. However in many countries in mainland Europe they are huge. And I mean huge, due in part to the large amount of airplay they receive from MTV. Dance act Faithless are similar position in that they have a much bigger fan base in Europe than the UK where they originated. Another twist is more obvious given that the channels are broadcast from the same building. It is highly possible that parts of the music policy of MTV Europe could be influenced by a British rather than continental agenda. The key idea is how different audiences can interpret music in different ways and how they can be influenced by it. Like it or not, a multinational music industry now exists. Musical genres or 'scenes' (as is perhaps a better term) can affect and create identity or nationalistic ideas, such was the case with the UK and 'Britpop'.

But this is partly it you know, why different MTVs are a necessity, for in Europe dance is king (or queen perhaps?), where acts like Faithless rule supreme. MTV in the UK and Ireland is a pastiche of so many different styles because that is the nature of its audience, that's what Radio 1 broadcasts and that's what is on Top of the Pops week in week out.

But even taking this for granted perhaps it could it be possible from this to suggest that even though MTV is localised, it can still create some kind of globalised effect from the spread of a universal musical consciousness. It must be said that music television is certainly one of the mediums most commonly associated with the trans-nationalisation of culture and the development of possible 'hybrid' cultures through globalisation.

MTV (as part of Viacom) and other similar companies have created interesting consequences in newer territories like India where traditional cultures are being penetrated by a media history (from music or otherwise) which is predominantly of Western origin and not their own. Indeed a key stylistic of MTV is its trademark mixing together of styles and genres. For example in South America MTV Latino is

showing definite signs of this 'coming together' of media and musical cultures. Robert Hanke in his essay 'MTV: Music Television in Latin America' talks of a 'Latin' audiovisual 'space' existing in South America; a hybrid mix of cultural values which transcend the national borders there. MTV Latino's playlist mediates Latin and American/European rock influences, no doubt participating in the movement towards a kind of cultural homogeneity.

I get up to go to the kitchen and make my dinner. You see another globalised aspect of the product of 'MTV' throughout the globe is the consistency in programming formats across the different MTV services. For example, the 4-6pm slot I described at the beginning of this article is called 'Select' and it is common to many of the MTV networks at least Europe-wide.

This commonality of formatting follows the same basic idea of continuity that many other global companies use so effectively. Indeed an interesting comparison is to be found by looking at MTV and McDonalds; you can go into any of their outlets across the globe, order a Big Mac and you will get basically the same product wherever you are on the earth. Certainly this idea of brand identity is a key idea in terms of the financial aspect of Viacom's operation, since MTV is now one of the most recognised global brands along with McDonalds and Coca Cola.

Indeed it is interesting to think of MTV as 'fast food'. It was once said that the band Oasis was the musical equivalent of fast food, immensely satisfying but leaving you hungry for more. MTV's output also satisfies that 'easily pleasing' idea. It does not try to instil any values but instead merely entertains, or at a much lower level, fills time. Indeed, I flick to it in the advert breaks of other programmes to see if there is anything worth watching for a couple of minutes or so. Suddenly I can be sucked in and be there too long. My programme has started again.

Yet surely all I have done is flick from one set of adverts to another. After all MTV is the embodiment of promotional culture, utilising a great number of promos like jingles on a radio station. Its latest set of these use stereotypical images of India such as street boot polishers and rickshaw pullers. The idea of Indian exoticism was originally picked up by the Beatles of course, but more recently newer acts such as Cornershop and the now thankfully defunct Kula Shaker have leaped onto the bandwagon. Although MTV tried to reflect such 'Indian-ness' they have characteristically put their foot in it, and bizarrely, make images of relative poverty seem strangely glamorous.

Another self-promotional item on MTV UK & Ireland shows a group of inbred country folk watching the channel and deciding what is 'cool' and 'uncool'. When one of the folk dances 'unsexily' he is taken outside where 'MTV: Music Television' is branded on his rear end. He is now a slave to the cause, a consumer of the product. Indeed regardless of any self-promotional ideas, MTV is based on advertising, and not just in the advertising breaks either; music videos are made to sell records. When Will Smith made the video for his song 'Wild Wild West' to accompany the film of the same name, some record company bigwig thought it would be really cool for it to be 12 minutes long and cost \$7 million. Strangely nobody seems to realise that Will Smith dancing around in a video costing \$7,000 would probably create reasonably the record sales. Not only do videos have to promote, they are now just

as important as the song itself. Another Smith video 'Miami' cost another \$6 million, the same as Michael Jackson's 'Scream' and just a bit more than Bush's 'Greedy Fly'. It seems that the promotional culture of MTV has become so distended that it is now not only important to get airplay, but it must also be more original and spectacular than everybody else's. MTV is no longer about music, it is about the videos that accompany it. Artistic excellence not required.

Viacom, of course, owns this 24 hour commercial to make money out of it. For localisation is not only key to audience, it is also key to attracting advertisers too. More localisation enables more targeting of advertisers and more targeting of the advertising itself. But regardless of this no other music network has the same presence or influence as MTV; it embodies the era of globalised media now more than ever before.

I come back in from the kitchen. Suddenly it is 6.30 and 'Brand:New' is on. This is my world of MTV.