International Television Co-productions and the Cultural Discount:

the Case of *Family Biz*, a Comedy

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Abstract

Transnational production is an increasingly important aspect of the media business. Transnational media production is especially susceptible to the cultural discount, the loss of value when a cultural product crosses a cultural border. This paper examines a case of media product innovation in the context of a trans-cluster, international co-production facing a cultural discount and, at times, a “double” or two layered cultural discount. The paper presents and analyzes the case of a Canada-France television co-production titled *Family Biz,* a half hour, live action comedy originally created for a North American demographic of kids aged nine to twelve years old (also known as “tweens”) and their parents. The series involved partners in Toronto, Montreal, and Paris, and was shot in Ottawa. The paper limns *Family Biz’s* creative development, financing, production and delivery to demonstrate how television now is being produced under the pressures and dictates of internationally conceived co-production agreements, and how these arrangements deal (or fail to deal) with the cultural discount. To work within the international co-production framework, the content for *Family Biz* must serve several masters. As a France-Canada co-production, at times its storylines, tone, themes, cultural references and humor are deemed by the French broadcaster as too “North American” or by the Canadian broadcaster as not North American enough. This becomes the first layer of the double cultural discount. Having overcome this challenge, the next step would be to market the completed cultural into the rich US market. There the production faces a second loss of value, the second layer of cultural discount. *Family Biz* is a case study of how obstacles to growth are overcome when media producers leverage international co-productions, and other obstacles emerge – some of which are directly attributable to the cultural discount.

Keywords

Clustering / Cross-cultural / cultural discount / coproduction / television / tween / Canada / France / International

Introduction

International collaborative media production ventures are promoted by many countries as a way to give producers access to greater financial and creative resources as well as new markets. International media co-production is thus centrally preoccupied with cultural boundary-crossing. Research suggests that media products suffer a "cultural discount" when they cross cultural boundaries (Hoskins and Mirus, 1998). This occurs when a media product is "valued to a lesser extent by foreign audiences that lack the cultural background and knowledge needed for full appreciation of the product" (Lee, 2006). The cultural discount causes diminishment of market value and it puts countries with relatively small domestic media markets at a considerable competitive disadvantage. Some cultural boundaries are more significant and harder to hurdle than others. Comedies, for example, are more culturally rooted and specific than dramas. Comedies are therefore more difficult to export and they thus suffer a greater cultural discount than drama.

This paper examines a case of media product innovation in the context of a trans-cluster, international co-production facing a cultural discount and, arguably, a two layered or double cultural discount. The paper presents and analyzes the case of a Canada-France television co-production titled *Family Biz*, a half hour, live action comedy originally created for a North American demographic of kids aged nine to twelve years old (also known as "tweens") and their parents. In the series, life is sweet for three independent teens, Eli, Avalon and Ronnie Keller. Their career-driven parents are absent and the Keller kids indulge themselves with house parties, shopping sprees and property damage (Nadler and Pryce, *Family Biz: Shake the Box*, 2008). But then their father, David Keller, self-proclaimed "corporate gunslinger" is downsized. Dad now works from his home office in the attic.[1] Dave/Dad vows to reconnect with his kids and apply every rule he ever learned in the business world to the business of parenting… and in the process he destroys his kids' social lives (Nadler, *Series Bible v5*, 2007).

Family Biz was co-produced by a medium sized production company based in Montreal, a small producer, Summit Crescent Productions Limited, based in Toronto, and a French producer headquartered in Paris. The series was shot in HD in English in Ottawa, Ontario. A specialty cable broadcaster licensed the series for broadcast in English-speaking Canada. A public broadcaster was the lead broadcaster for France. The series premiered in Canada and France in spring 2009.

As one of *Family Biz's* Executive Producers and its "showrunner,"[2] James Nadler was ultimately responsible for creating, producing and delivering the series to its two lead broadcasters. Based on close observation and unfettered access to project documents,[3] this paper limns *Family Biz's*

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[1] *Family Biz* was originally entitled *Dad's in the Attic*.

[2] A showrunner is the individual empowered to make final creative decisions on a television series subject only to network or distributor contractual approvals. Contrary to Hoskins, McFadyen, and Finn (1997), TV series often bear the stamp of one auteur, albeit a writer rather than a director.

[3] To preserve anonymity we do not identify sources of unpublished information, with the exception of internal project documents owned by the producer of *Family Biz.*

creative development, financing, production and delivery to demonstrate how television now is being produced under the pressures and dictates of internationally conceived co-production agreements, and how these arrangements deal (or fail to deal) with the cultural discount on two identifiable levels. First, to work within the co-production framework, the content for *Family Biz* must serve several masters. As a France-Canada co-production, at times its storylines, tone, themes, cultural references and humor are deemed by the French broadcaster as too "North American" or by the Canadian broadcaster as not North American enough. Second, once the product has been adjusted for its initial markets then its producers face a further level of cultural discount when trying to market the series into other territories. *Family Biz* is a case study of how obstacles to growth are overcome when media producers leverage international co-productions, and other obstacles emerge – some of which directly flow from this double cultural discount.

This paper's methodology relies on the first hand account of events by its co-author James Nadler. The authors acknowledge that Mr. Nadler's personal involvement prevents him from being purely objective. However, that was a necessary trade-off for the high level of access to the documents, correspondence and people involved in the production of the series. As Aitken argues being an "insider" affords insights which may not be accessible to an "outsider." (Aitken, 2006). Further, it has been argued that researchers are never entirely objective (Rubin and Rubin 1995). Instead, this paper may be considered in part a narrative work where the researcher assumes the "dual position of academic researcher and personal self" to mine his life experiences (Ellis and Bochner 2000).

International co-production and the cultural discount

International media co-productions are an important mode of cultural production and a frequently favored business strategy among smaller producers. In Canada, 44 television co-production projects (at $240M volume) and 14 theatrical film co-production projects (at $57M volume) were undertaken in 2008 (CFTPA, 2009).[4] Many dozens of countries (with the notable exception of the United States) have instituted treaties that permit co-productions to satisfy local content quotas in participating jurisdictions, reciprocally opening up domestic markets and allowing access to national and regional production incentives. Partners can thereby pool financing to raise the substantial budget required to produce the "master-copy" which can then be reproduced at minimal cost to supply additional markets (Hoskins and Mirus, 2000). For example, an official France-Canada co-production qualifies as both Canadian and French/European Union content to satisfy local content quotas in each jurisdiction. A pre-sale in France could then, in effect, cover off at least twenty percent of the production's costs where France is the minority partner.

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[4] It is a matter of some concern in Canada that international co-production activity for television has declined during the past decade, while the volume of international theatrical co-production activity has fluctuated greatly from year to year. This is attributed to the increased competition for production partners, whose attractiveness is determined in part by attractiveness of domestic production incentives.

Two competing policy rationales underpin governments' support for international co-productions.[5] In the first place, by pooling financial resources and sharing access to each other's domestic market, countries can induce the emergence of indigenous production capabilities and foster the production of indigenous media content. This reflects the intention to resist market pressures from the world media hegemon, the United States, which dominates markets and aesthetics in many regions of the world, particularly in North America. Canada's stated media policy objective is to create television programming that "speaks to Canadians about, and reflects, Canadian themes and subject matter" (CTF, 2009). The preferred outcome of international co-productions designed with import-substitution in mind is the production of media content that resonates with domestic audiences, as an alternative to Hollywood fare. In principle, such co-produced media content contains significant amounts of local cultural references. Applying national content expectations to internationally co-produced media products runs the risk, however, of incoherently blending cultural references from each partner, resulting in a cultural "pudding" (a frequent criticism of European feature film co-productions).

In the second place, governments foster international film and television co-production in the hope of generating exportable media product. This is an unstated but widely understood policy objective. Co-produced media products may be treated as national content for tax incentive purposes but they do not necessarily contain significant national or local cultural references. High quality of production, international stars, and cosmopolitan themes are the features that help make the product attractive in international markets. For example, the crime thriller *Eastern Promises*, a Canada/UK co-production that received critical acclaim, was supported by Telefilm Canada and was directed by Canadian David Cronenberg. It is a story of Russian gangsters set in London, and it contains no recognizable Canadian elements. Many observers comment that production of "cosmopolitan" or "timeless, spaceless" film and television products that can be successful in multiple markets, especially the U.S. market, is the prevailing objective of international co-production ventures, rather than cultural exchange or production of "local" content for domestic audiences.[6]

The concept of cultural discount was developed to explain the diminishment of value of cultural border-crossing media products. It assumes that most media products are produced for national markets, after which they might be exported if they can overcome the discount. International co-production as an emerging mode of media production brings new twists to the concept of cultural discount. By producing one media product for two or more different markets, co-production necessarily raises the question of how to decide which cultural markers and attributes are to be played up or down. Furthermore, the content of the media product (its "textual meaning") is not the only thing subject to negotiation. The production process itself is largely a negotiated enterprise that involves bringing relationships with culturally diverse broadcasters, business partners, production crews, and funding agencies into alignment. This process strongly affects the characteristics of the resulting media product and therefore its marketability.

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[5] This question is usefully discussed in Ashuri (2007).

[6] See especially the discussion in Baltruschat (2003), Colson-Duparchy (2002), Hammett-Jamart (2004), Jäckel (2001), Morawetz et al. (2007) and Pardo (2007).

The two competing policy rationales mentioned above combine in practice to create a double cultural discount for Canadian television producers. They must first minimize the cultural discount for their domestic markets, because they need to license their product to a domestic broadcaster in order to have access to funding. Once they have navigated through the tensions and cross-cultural issues of the co-production then the producers must manage the creative and production process to minimize the cultural discount in order to unlock the value of a third market -- in the case of *Family Biz,* the United States - which was not part of *Family Biz's* initial production financing.

The United States dominates television's international market and aesthetic. While there are other global competitors in this arena, such as Japan, the entry of global media conglomerate juggernaut Disney into the children's television marketplace has only served to reassert the U.S. presence in this arena (Valdivia, 2008). Various studies well summarized by Dupagne and Waterman (1998) point out that in fiction (scripted) programming, the U.S. is the "chief…exporter" and dominates the TV landscape. Non U.S. media companies lack the financial and human resources, business capabilities, and access to distributional shelf space to successfully compete head-to-head with the Hollywood "studios" like Disney.[7] As Dupagne and Waterman argue, larger-budget productions attract larger audiences. Generally speaking, low-budget productions do not achieve the same popularity, as measured by ratings, as do high-budget productions. When producers have more financing at their disposal, they are able to spend more money on production inputs (e.g., skilled labor for producing special effects; elaborate sets; top actors, writers, and directors) that enhance the appeal of the program or film (Dupagne and Waterman, 1998). U.S. productions in general have higher production budgets than non-U.S. shows, even those programs that leverage international co-production advantages.

Detailed production budgets are trade secrets. By Canadian industry standards, *Family Biz*'s budget is a good one for a live action series. *Family Biz* episodes were shot on an average of 2.9 days per episode. In contrast, *Aaron Stone,* a Disney XD live action series, was shot on 4.5 days an episode. Thus, *Aaron Stone* has 55% more resources just for filming. The two series clock in at the same running time, and were filmed in the same year in Ontario under comparable labor conditions (with the same production designer). However, the additional resources allocated for *Aaron Stone* would be reflected in a slicker, more audience-pleasing quality of the final product.

Family Biz' budget pales in comparison to the resources that U.S. media distributors Disney or Nickelodeon ("Nick") apply to the same genre. That said, in the development and production of *Family Biz,* the Disney house style became a point of reference for the show. The creative and aesthetic choices made for *Family Biz* to satisfy the requirements of international co-production have direct impact on how the product is perceived in the world's largest and, arguably, most discriminating market, the United States. In the genre of tween comedy, the Disney confection *Hannah Montana* is the current "800 pound gorilla" of U.S. cultural exports. The fourth season of the series has been ordered for an extended 30 episodes. The latest feature film spin-off grossed $34.0 million in the U.S./Canadian market in its first weekend, a record for a G-rated live action film (Barnes, 2009) and an additional $26.1 million outside the United States (McNary, 2009). The series reaches 1.2 million viewers a week in the United Kingdom (Afan,

[7] On the business capabilities that enable small Canadian television production firms to compete in the children's filmed entertainment industry, see Davis, Vladica and Berkowitz (2008).

2009). Even *Family Biz* itself acknowledges *Hannah Montana's* current cultural currency by parodying her with the character of Amanda Santa Anna (Nadler and Pryce, *Branded*, 2008).

Negotiating and managing an international television co-production

Researchers have begun to examine the operational and creative management issues raised by international media co-productions. The organizational and operational complexity of international co-productions is frequently noted (Hoskins, McFadyen and Finn, 1997: chapter 9). There are multiple transaction costs involved in financing and producing a series through co-production treaties and structures. The applications for tax credits and funding agencies require lawyers, accountants and administrators. As an official treaty co-production, a separate set of applications must be made to French and Canadian national agencies.

It is not generally appreciated that the production firms engaged in these complex transnational ventures are usually very small – often consisting of a producer-entrepreneur with little staff or administrative support. Because international co-production stretches the operational capabilities of very small production firms, these firms usually must partner with larger domestic firms – adding an additional layer of complexity to the venture. The cross-cultural issues go beyond the expected cultural discount factors such as France-Canada communication tensions, and the tensions between the U.S. model for television programs and its international competitors. Arguably the greatest tension was due the decision, made for tax incentive reasons, to place the production's main manufacturing centre in an outlying region, Ottawa.

We organize the following analysis of *Family Biz* as a trans-cluster, transnationally networked boundary-crossing venture in terms of its regulatory, organizational and operational, and textual properties (Baltruschat, 2006).

Regulatory properties of Family Biz

Family Biz could not have been made without the local content requirements, production incentives, and co-production treaties provided by public authorities in Canada and France. As a production that satisfies Canadian television content requirements, *Family Biz* could apply for higher levels of Canadian tax credits and look to public and semi-public media funding agencies to finance the series. Qualifying as European content made it more attractive to distributors looking for content to satisfy local content broadcast quotas in other European countries.

To work within the co-production framework, however, the story content for *Family Biz* must serve several masters. Both the French and Canadian lead broadcasters have sharply delineated resources to commission original programming (also known as a pre-sale). As both broadcasters devoted significant resources to finance *Family Biz* the series had to satisfy their regulatory and commercial needs.

The Canadian broadcaster as a condition of its broadcast license must spend 40% of its annual gross revenues of the preceding year to acquire and invest in Canadian programming provided by independent Canadian producers (CRTC, 2006). In exchange, a Canadian specialty broadcaster gains genre protection from direct competition by non-Canadian broadcasters. In other words, U.S. niche broadcasters cannot directly distribute their signal into Canada if an existing Canadian controlled broadcaster already serves the genre. For example:

US Broadcaster	Canadian Broadcaster	Niche
Disney Channel	Family Channel	Youth
Nickelodeon	YTV	Youth
Cartoon Network	Teletoon	Animation
HBO	TMN / Movie Central	Premium movies
Showtime	TMN / Movie Central	Premium movies

The U.S. broadcasters can, however, license their trademark and signature programming to Canadian networks. And the Canadian broadcaster reserves a large portion of its budget to acquire international programming mostly from the United States. U.S. shows like *SpongeBob SquarePants*, *Hannah Montana*, *Fairly Odd Parents* and *ICarly* are typically the highest rated shows on Canadian youth broadcast channels and, as a result, generate the most advertising revenues.

For U.S. producers and broadcasters, product placements and merchandising tie-ins normally generate additional revenues. They also make the series more attractive to its intended audience. The cable broadcaster Disney XD believes that for young male viewers (9 to 14): "Brands matter – especially clothes, shoes, hats, electronics" and "Skater brands and logos are COOL, dude!" (Walt Disney Company, 2009).[8]

But public broadcasters in France are prohibited from having logos and product placements in the youth series they commission and commercial logos have to be blurred or animated out. *Family Biz's* Canadian specialty channel has similar concerns and can contractually refuse product placements in *Family Biz* even if that refusal is "unreasonable." In complying with these French and Canadian requirements, *Family Biz* arguably lost some of the cachet and attractiveness for U.S. audiences.

For *Family Biz's* lead broadcasters the stakes were high. *Family Biz's* Canadian broadcaster needed to decide how to allocate its limited Canadian Television Fund (CTF) performance envelope.[9] At the very least, the CTF supports twenty percent of the Canadian portion of the co-production budget. *Family Biz* was one of **only** two live action scripted series[10] commissioned

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[8] During the first week of February 2008, Disney held an 80-person, all-platform international meeting to discuss *Hannah Montana's* future. Publishing, theme parks, radio, games, internet, consumer products, theater, feature films—*every* Disney business was represented (Greenfeld, 2008).

[9] Now called the Canadian Media Fund, the former Canadian Television Fund is a joint public-private fund established to finance production of Canadian content for Canadian broadcasters.

[10] A "scripted" show does not include so-called live action "reality" series like *The Adrenaline Project* or *Survivor* which are actually loosely scripted but do not use, for the most part, unionized writers, actors or crew. Therefore, their production and acquisition costs are much lower per hour for the broadcaster.

by its Canadian broadcaster for production in 2008. *Family Biz* was intended to compete directly with successful Disney sit-coms aired on its chief competitor (Burgess, 2008).

The French public broadcaster's budget only allows it to commission five original productions per year. It seldom pre-buys series so the French broadcaster considered their "strong involvement [in the creative process of *Family Biz*] as legitimate" even though it was a minority partner in the co-production. Ordinarily, a non-U.S. broadcaster who licenses a Disney property such as *Hannah Montana* would have no creative input beyond, at times, approving the versioning (dubbing) of the series into the local language.

The complex financial plan of *Family Biz* reflects the enormous up-front transaction costs and significant ongoing administrative costs incurred by producers to put together a production with multiple sources of funding. In Canada, production financing is "a jigsaw puzzle" (Gorica, 1999) requiring a great deal of effort and synchronized paperwork to piece together various contributions to the full costs of production. The "very cumbersome" financing process that Canadian independent producers must undertake requires "completion of all the due diligence imposed by financial institutions, foreign distributors, broadcasters, completion bonders, and government agencies" (Nordicity, 2005). The costs are a frequent source of complaint among Canadian producers.

The series' financing plan just prior to production was as follows:

Dad's in the Attic / Family Biz Financing Plan – January 2008	
Projected Source	Percentage of Production Financing
Quebec Tax Credit	3%
Ontario Tax Credit	14%
Canadian Federal Tax Credit	8%
Canadian Broadcaster – License Fee	20%
Quebec Broadcaster (TBD)	1%
Canadian Television Fund	16%
Shaw Rocket Fund	4%
Independent Production Fund (IPF)	1.5%
Bell New Media Fund	.5%
French Broadcaster License Fee	13%
French Cable License Fee	3%
French CNC & French Distribution	3%
International Distribution *	12%
Producer Deferrals **	4%
Total does not equal 100% due to rounding.	
Source: (*Family Biz Financing Plan*, 2008.)	

(yellow)	Canadian production funding
*	Advance against all world territories except France, Canada, US
**	The Canadian producers collectively deferred part of their fees to make up 80% of the deferral. The French producers were responsible for 20% of this deferral.

Organizational and operational properties of an international co-production

The day to day production of *Family Biz* demonstrates the operational complexity of co-productions, which can structurally resemble a Russian nesting doll. To access the financing available in France, the series was a venture involving two small production companies and two broadcasters. On the Canadian side of the equation, the series was an official co-production between a micro Ontario company and a medium sized Quebec company to deliver a product for a large Ontario/Alberta based broadcaster. As such, *Family Biz* spanned three production centers (Paris, Montreal and Toronto) and an outlying region wanting to develop audiovisual production capabilities (Ottawa). In assembling the cultural workers for the series, *Family Biz* drew upon the local geographic area and the three established production centers. Tensions and coordination challenges among all these stakeholders exacerbated the product's risk of cultural discount.

Summit Crescent's main assets are its intellectual property developed or acquired by its principal, James Nadler, and Summit's right to "loan-out" Nadler's services as a writer and producer to other production companies on a project by project basis. Summit has no employees, no liabilities and very low overhead. By producing *Family Biz* through Summit, its producers were collectively able to leverage a higher level of tax credit as a regional Ontario production than if the series had been produced as a purely Quebec production. As well, the co-production allowed Summit to grow its business without incurring ongoing overhead and costs.

The Quebec production house, in contrast, is a larger company with approximately 30 full time employees and offices in Toronto, Vancouver and Los Angeles. Its head office is in Montreal. In 2008 it was among the top five independent television producers in Canada in terms of production spending. Since 1998 it has produced, co-produced or provided production services on 100 TV movies and mini-series, television series and feature films.

Nadler was known as a writer by the French broadcaster and had pitched *Family Biz* to that broadcaster as early as 2005. But it was the French co-producer, based in Paris, who closed the deal two years later. The co-producer's market knowledge greatly improved *Family Biz's* access to the partner's market (in this case France) (see Hoskins and Mirus, 2000). This market "knowledge" included the French co-producer's personal relationships with the French broadcasters and strong reputation for quality.

The three co-production partners have different business goals. Nadler's goal is not to build a company (and take on overhead) but to make the best possible show. The success of one series for Nadler/Summit leads to the deal to write/produce the next one. The Quebec partner, in contrast, wants to build a volume of production and television content library, its own infrastructure and resources. The French co-producer wants to satisfy its home broadcaster while acknowledging the need to deal with the Canadian specialty channel's requirements.

The Quebec producer's excellent reputation in the industry, staff, resources and access to capital were key advantages for the series' financing and production. However, the Quebec producer's corporate goals sometimes conflicted with the immediate needs of the *Family Biz* production. For example, in casting bit parts ("day players"), Nadler was satisfied to quickly determine the best actor for the role. That was the Quebec producer's primary goal as well. The Quebec producer, however, also wanted to review all audition tapes at length to fulfill its secondary goal of building an acting pool in the Ottawa area for its other projects. This took more time than necessary. As well, the series needed to accommodate the Quebec producer's existing deals with suppliers and unions. For example if the series had been produced solely by Summit/Nadler, it could have used non-union below-the-line crew for a lower per-episode cost and a more flexible work schedule. But as a co-production, *Family Biz* was legally obligated to honor the Quebec producer's collective agreement with the IATSE union.

Family Biz was effectively a co-production involving three major production centers (Paris, Montreal and Toronto) and an outlying region with film and television aspirations (Ottawa). In assembling the cultural workers for the series, *Family Biz* drew upon resources in the local geographic area and the three established production centers as follows:

- Toronto: Executive producer/showrunner; all the writers; the Canadian directors; most of the cast and guest stars; and some camera crew. The Production Designer lives between Ottawa and Toronto but was considered part of the Toronto crew.

- Montreal: The producer; one executive producer; one lead performer; some supporting actors; craft service; post production supervision; story coordinator; props master; some camera crew.

- Ottawa: The production manager; the background performers (extras); some supporting actors; the director of photography; the art department (except for the production designer); first assistant directors; the location; wardrobe; transportation departments; some of the camera crew.

- Paris: Two executive producers, a co-producer; the sound department (including post sound) and composer.

In addition, some freelancers originally from the Ottawa area were willing to return there and be hired as "local". This increased their cost effectiveness/value to the production as the producers did not pay for their accommodation. Some actors who were not Ottawa-based also offered their services as "local" to increase their chances of being cast.

The need to structure the series' financing and production as an international co-production atomized certain departments, creating coordination and communication challenges. In a U.S.-based comedy series like *The Simpsons*, much of the writing takes place in "the room" with writers facing across each other at a conference table and contributing to the scripts. For the writing department of *Family Biz,* the head writer/showrunner was in Ottawa during filming. The Executive Story editor was in Toronto. The story coordinator was in Montreal. And freelance writers contributing individual scripts were in Toronto or Bolton, Ontario (Hannafin, 2008). To meet with writers in person, Nadler travelled from Ottawa to Toronto on weekends and gathered them up in his living room. Notes on scripts would come from the networks in Paris and Toronto via e-mail with little actual discussion over the phone.

The lack of face-to-face communication increased the possibility of misunderstanding and inefficiencies in dealing with changes required by broadcasters. In order to modify a single line of dialogue, Nadler had to fax or e-mail the change to the story coordinator in Montreal. She would make the change and distribute it to the broadcasters in Paris and Toronto and to the production coordinator back in Ottawa. The production coordinator would then distribute the change to the cast and crew.

Technological advances allowed the editing and post-production work on the series to be widely distributed geographically. However, the need to incur expenditures in Ontario, Quebec and France for co-production rules made the post-production (editing) of the series somewhat convoluted. The editing equipment was rented and shipped in from France as part of the required French expenditures. Picture editing took place in Ottawa. The server that stored the HD images and sound for the series was maintained and monitored by its supplier in Paris. If the editing server overheated or malfunctioned and had to be shut down (which occurred somewhat often), it had to be rebooted remotely from Paris. Once shooting was completed, Nadler commuted from Toronto to Ottawa to meet with the editors to complete the picture edit. Color correction of the series' images took place in Montreal. Animation was subcontracted out to freelancers in Montreal, Ottawa and Toronto. Music composition and sound editing took place in Paris. Nadler and the French composer conferred in Nadler's imperfect French and the composer's better, but still imperfect, English. Rough sound mixes were e-mailed to Nadler for viewing and comment. Once the sound was locked (completed) the Montreal lab would package and deliver the series to its Canadian specialty channel in Toronto (Measroch, 2008)

Interestingly, the greatest cultural tension did not arise from the international nature of the production, but as a result of the decision, made for tax incentive reasons, to place the production's main manufacturing centre in an outlying region, Ottawa. These tensions arose from differences in capabilities and work culture between the major production centers and Ottawa crews. For example, some Toronto crew members were accustomed to a faster pace of work than was normally asked of the Ottawa crew. The main set construction was delayed. The Ottawa set construction crew valued their weekends and refused to work the Sunday before shooting began to complete construction as scheduled. This made it impossible for the showrunner to adjust the set and its furnishings to accommodate network notes. Successful U.S. tween series currently in the market like *Hannah Montana* feature bright, candy colored sets. The French broadcaster expressed ongoing concern about the set and furnishings being too dark for a comedy. In a U.S. backed production, the simple solution would be to buy new, brighter furniture. *Family Biz's* budget and production schedule could not accommodate that modification.

This may be an unfair generalization but crew members from Toronto and Paris seemed more willing to sacrifice more weekends to work on the production than crew members from Ottawa and Montreal. During a planned break in production ("hiatus"), Nadler proposed that the set be repainted to brighten up some walls. The Montreal based producers gently rejected the proposal. The Quebec producer preferred to keep costs down by closing the Ottawa production office and not hiring the art department during the two week hiatus. This decision was also made to allow for vacations for the Montreal and Ottawa crews. The set color issue remains an irritant and the French broadcaster maintains that the sets should have brighter colors.

The Ottawa members of the crew had largely worked on movies-of-the-week and had not produced a television series before. A movie of the week is prepped in three to four weeks and shot in 12 to 18 days. *Family Biz* shot twenty-six episodes in 76 days – a very ambitious schedule for a TV production. The pace and volume of production were especially tough for the Ottawa personnel in the wardrobe and props departments. One small but telling example: the props department and set dressers never followed through with the directive from the series' producers to avoid English words on screen where possible (see below). As late as filming Episode 24, English words still had to be physically removed from the set by the producers or digitally erased after the fact. As one of the Ottawa crew members confessed on the completion of filming to Nadler: "I knew [the producers kept saying] not to use English words but it was not emphasized." Arguably, a more cohesive props department drawn from one production center could have avoided this problem.

Textual issues: negotiating the content of an international co-production

Co-producers need to "get onto the same page" creatively and agree on the very nature of the show they are producing. For example, in Shimpach's analysis of *Highlander: The Series* the French considered the show, at its core, a detective series while the Germans considered it an action-adventure series (Shimpach, 2005). Some cultural boundaries are more significant and harder to hurdle than others. Comedies are more culturally rooted and specific than dramas. A genre drama like *Highlander* contains narrative elements considered to be easily translatable across linguistic and cultural barriers, including sword fights, special effects, and unambiguously 'bad guys' (Shimpach, 2005). Comedies therefore suffer a greater cultural discount than drama. For example, a pun or goofy song is hard to translate and dub without losing the humor. As a result, both of these comic conventions were discouraged by *Family Biz's* French co-producers and broadcaster.

Language barriers are not the only issue. *Corner Gas*, arguably the most successful Canadian domestic comedy ever in terms of ratings, failed to find an American audience. It hadn't "performed up to expectations" for its US carrier WGN and was demoted to the four a.m. slot (WGN, 2009). Rather than directly import comedies, the U.S. market seems to prefer to buy the format rights and adapt/remake the foreign series for its own market: e.g. *All In The Family, Sanford and Son*, and *The Office*. As Hoskins and Mirus (2000) note: "a cultural discount for traded programs or films arises because viewers in importing markets generally find it difficult to identify with the way of life, values, history, institutions, myths, and physical environment depicted."

Both of *Family Biz*'s lead broadcasters needed the subject matter to appeal to their respective audiences. They pushed the producers to eliminate any cultural references (subject matter), visual cues or casting decisions that read as foreign to their respective domestic audiences. But in the process of producing *Family Biz,* it was the network executives and series producers who tried to anticipate and sidestep this reaction, especially with an eye to the lucrative (but parochial) US market.

In one story proposed early in the development process, Ronnie brings a peanut butter sandwich to school. Peanut and tree nut products are generally banned from school lunches across North

America due to the danger of anaphylactic shock. The contraband sandwich becomes subject to a fierce bidding war. The content issue was neatly summed up in an e-mail exchange as follows:

> [France] The writers need to keep in mind that the series needs to work too in the French version, for a French audience, especially in terms of cultural references and ways of life. For example the reference to peanut butter sandwiches which is specifically North American does not mean anything really in France: could it be switched to something more international (club sandwiches, ham sandwiches?)
>
> [Nadler] response. I suggest we discuss this on a case by case basis. Peanut butter is funny. Ham sandwiches are not. But maybe cheese would work instead. It may be, properly set up and explained, that a North American experience will translate internationally as in the case of *DeGrassi*.

DeGrassi is a Canadian series that sells well internationally and been licensed for many years in the U.S. on the N network (Niehart, 2005). In any event, the "case by case" approach did not totally satisfy the French broadcaster's needs. As one of *Family Biz's* French co-producers noted:

> …[our French broadcaster] is obsessed by local vs. international references - this is a point that as James [Nadler] suggested should be treated case by case - the setting of the show is North American and we in Europe are used to North American common refs (like peanut butter) - [the French broadcaster] is bit rigid about that so James' diplomacy will be much needed there!

For the French broadcaster "local" is code for North America and "international" is understood to mean, in many cases, just France. As a result, the peanut butter story was "killed" and the episode was never written or shot.

Other North American references deemed not "international" enough for France included teen leadership weekends, professional wrestling, and high school musicals. In the first two examples, episodes were produced using those cultural references but not without delays in writing and editing of the episodes until France could be persuaded to accept the stories. Ironically, the ice tour of the Disney tween hit *High School Musical* is currently playing in Paris. All three *High School Musicals* played successfully in France with Disney making specific promotional efforts for that market. Even so, the French broadcaster maintains that high school musicals are a "local" North American reference and "refused" the proposed story for that reason. As predicted by Hoskins and Mirus (1988), the French co-production partner's creative input was used where possible to eliminate, or at least minimize, the cultural discount for the French market/viewer. This effort seems successful. *Family Biz* tested very well with French focus groups and although it has not yet aired in France on its primary network the series has effectively been relicensed for a second season by France.

Other adjustments in subject matter took time and thought but were accepted by both sides. A chicken pox outbreak was the comedic premise for the episode titled *Lockdown*. Vaccination against chicken pox has become common in North America. The French broadcaster's executive maintained that this is not the case in France, and that parents still expose their children to other pox ridden children to build resistance. To deal with the North American reality, dialogue was added to the script to imply that Dave/Dad had forgotten to get the Keller kids immunized. In describing *Highlander*'s creative process Shimpach notes that "such squabbles highlight not only just how difficult negotiating such production …[issues] can be, but also the need for individual markets to make claims of local-ness for the program" (Shimpach, 2005).

On the Canadian side, the Canadian broadcaster's goal was, in effect, to avoid the cultural discount altogether and make the series as saleable in the U.S. as possible. While a Canadian broadcaster does not profit from a U.S. sale, its ratings can benefit from the U.S. broadcaster's marketing efforts leaking across the porous U.S.-Canada border. One of *Family Biz*'s Canadian broadcast executives trained as a development executive of kids' and family series in the United States at major U.S. broadcasters Nickelodeon and WBKids. His touchstones in discussing creative choices on scripts and casting were commercially successful U.S. tween series like *Hannah Montana*, *Wizards of Waverly Place* and *ICarly*. Those tween series are traditional "sit-coms" shot in studio with three cameras, flat general lighting and limited use of exterior locations. The acting style is broader in general than a single camera comedy. The dialogue and rhythm of sit-com scenes are written to accommodate the addition of a laugh track on the soundtrack to cue the audience when a line or reaction is funny.

Visually, *Family Biz* was designed with a single camera look with directional lighting similar to *Malcolm in the Middle*. The French broadcaster insisted on (and the producers were happy to agree) that the series not have a "sit-com" aesthetic and feature exterior scenes on location as often as possible. In other words, *Family Biz* does not reflect Disney's prevailing house style for tween comedies. The Canadian broadcaster agreed to this approach and appreciated the rich, filmic look of the series. (One executive at another Canadian network expressed his surprise at how "sophisticated" the look and humor of the series turned out to be). That said, the Canadian broadcaster's next scripted tween series to start production, *How to Be Indie*, reverted to the traditional U.S. sit-com look and production technique. Ultimately, the decision to shoot *Family Biz* in single camera may have contributed to the challenges the series faces in selling into other markets, notably the United States, as will be discussed below.

From the start, France clearly did not want a "sit-com" laugh track for the series. The Canadian broadcaster agreed with that approach initially. (Following the model of *Life with Derek*, music and sound effects were used instead to cue audience reactions). In reviewing the completed shows, *Family Biz's* Canadian broadcaster still felt the music and sound effects could be more aggressive and wanted to reconsider the laugh track if *Family Biz* was ordered for a second year.

Disney executives do not explicitly state that their series need a laugh track "for us to know when to laugh." However, Disney and Nick continue to produce, order and reorder tween comedies with laugh tracks and acquire very few half hour comedies without them, *Life With Derek* being a notable exception. Interestingly, when *How to Be Indie* completed shooting May 11, 2009, the producers were in discussions with the Canadian specialty channel over whether to add a laugh track.

For a comedy, casting is the key to a series' viability in multiple markets. *Family Biz* lacked the financial resources to pay for an established star (or even a star of the tween genre) that Disney or Nick productions can afford. As *Family Biz* was financed as a Canada-France co-production using funds from the Canadian Television Fund (CTF), its cast was effectively limited to the Canadian talent pool. Further, as Ontario and Quebec tax credits formed a significant part of the production's financing, hiring a lead actor who was not resident of one of those provinces would incur a significant penalty.

Reaching agreement on casting the series' leads was a long process exacerbated by the cross-cultural tensions of co-productions. The Keller Mom was originally written to be a French character and a "fish out of water" in the North American suburbs (Nadler, *Series Bible v2*, 2005). Official treaty co-productions require certain minimum labor expenditures on nationals from each participating country. In the case of a France-Canada co-production France's minimum is twenty percent (20%) (Telefilm, 2008). It was originally planned that the actress playing Mom would offset the required French costs.

Instead, France asked that Mom's backstory and accent be changed. The French broadcaster felt that Mom's accent would not stand out as different after she was dubbed into French. So Mom became South American. After securing the French pre-sale, Nadler hoped that a Hispanic character would help sell the series into the U.S. market with its growing Hispanic audience. (The lead teen girl and mother in *Wizards of Waverly Place* are similarly cast and played as Hispanic). As well, Canadian specialty channel's policies on cultural diversity expressly encourage non-traditional casting.

Canadian actresses auditioned both with and without accent. Mom was eventually cast, written and performed as South American. However, the French broadcaster took several weeks before they approved the actress proposed. They championed another actress who they felt could play the role as Persian, an ethnicity with more resonance to their audience. Ironically, France erased any accent (and ethnicity) from Mom when the series was dubbed into French. After an early in-house screening the Canadian specialty channel worried that the Mom might be misperceived by the audience as the family's housekeeper. And, in the end, potential U.S. broadcasters did not explicitly note Mom's background as a plus or minus for their domestic U.S. market. Therefore, this attempt by the producers to work against the cultural discount failed.

Except for one meeting in Montreal in May, 2007, and brief meetings at television markets like KidScreen and MIP TV, the two lead broadcasters rarely conferred with each other on creative approvals on *Family Biz*. Instead, the producers acted as go-betweens to build consensus. Casting Dad is a good example of this particular challenge of co-productions. A Canadian TV "star" auditioned. Although he would be twice as expensive as other finalists for the role, the Canadian specialty channel pushed for the candidate, feeling he would increase the "promotability" of the series for their market. The Canadian producers recognized that the actor would have little, if any, name recognition in the U.S. but felt the actor would be a creative asset, an admittedly subjective analysis that was shared by other Canadian writer/producers.

France did not approve the actor for Dad. He did not match their mental image of a high powered business executive in France. Instead, they felt the actor was more of a “salesman type,” unattractive and too broad as a performer.[11]

The last major part to be cast was the teen daughter, Avalon. Avalon is written as 15 years old. In casting Avalon the broadcasters’ conflicting needs became sharply evident. The Canadian broadcaster wanted *Family Biz* to appeal to its core tween audience, viewers nine to twelve years old. The Canadian broadcaster stressed the importance of this lead role for its audience and even attended final casting sessions in person. The Canadian broadcaster clearly sought out younger, “cuter” actresses who resembled the leads of *ICarly* and *Hannah Montana*. In contrast, the French broadcaster identifies its core audience as eleven to eighteen with young adults as old as 24 watching its programming in the slot reserved for *Family Biz*. France felt Avalon should be cast more realistically and not be “too pretty” and more of an outsider to the high school social scene. At the same time, the Quebec producer insisted that the actors playing Avalon and Eli be over eighteen years old, because of the significant work restrictions and additional costs involved in using child actors. The younger the actors, the fewer hours they can work each day (ACTRA, 2007). The Quebec production company wanted to avoid those costs and problems.

Over a period of three months, older actresses (18 to 20 years old) would be approved by France only to be rejected by the Canadian broadcaster as not attractive and/or not “relatable” enough to its audience. An offer went out to a 16 year old actress who fit the Canadian broadcaster’s criteria. However, due to the ongoing discussions between the partners over casting Dad this offer was delayed by several weeks and the actress was optioned by another TV series. Three weeks before shooting, the casting director found a 20 year old Ontario actress who was approved by all parties. *Family Biz* was her first professional acting assignment. In contrast, after Disney discovered Selena Gomez is an open casting call in Dallas five years ago, it placed her in three pilots before finding the right fit for her with *Wizards of Waverly Place* (Andreeva, 2009). The cost of Disney’s casting process is not available, but to film three comparable pilots in Canada would cost roughly $1.2 million.

The perils of casting a co-production directly impacted the series’ value in other markets demonstrating the perils of the double cultural discount. One Quebec broadcaster rejected *Family Biz* in part due to its “weak casting.” The producers had to reduce spending (and related production quality) on *Family Biz* to cover the loss of the anticipated financing from this broadcaster.

In reviewing the marketability of the series for the U.S., a veteran U.S. producer points to the casting as a major flaw. In his opinion the actress playing Avalon is simply too old. He feels that Avalon appears to be in her mid-twenties. He further argues that U.S. tween comedies like *Hannah Montana* feature female leads that are 13 to 15 years old. Once those leads hit twenty, these series generally cease production.

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[11] The Canadian broadcaster knew the actor in part from his role as a high powered stock broker on a Canadian drama series set in a merchant bank.

Beyond major casting issues, the co-producers had to negotiate many seemingly minor production and creative decisions between the various partners. For example, there was an ongoing discussion over the use of English or French words on the screen. *Family Biz* is set in Toronto, Canada (Nadler, *Series Bible,* 2007). Admittedly, not much of the story turns on this, but in order to qualify for Canadian Television Fund support the series must be set in Canada (CTF, 2009). The explicit Canadian content references are limited to the Keller family's street (Admiral Road) and the fact that the high school is named for a former Canadian Prime Minister (MacDonald) and farm equipment manufacturer (Massey). The school looks North American, not French. The Keller house and street feature North American architecture and cars.

So, it was a surprise to the co-producers (both French and Canadian) how strongly the French broadcaster objected to <u>any</u> English words appearing on screen. As one of the co-producers e-mailed: "[Our broadcaster] does not want words in English to appear on screen…They are also adamant about this." In some cases, simple solutions were found. Inserts of computer screens were double shot in English and French. But other English words needed to be digitally erased from the episodes at additional, unbudgeted cost. Nearly completed episodes had to be recalled and repackaged (e.g. Nadler and Pryce, *Damage Control*, 2008)

This English language issue first arose in the episode *Fine Art of Negotiation*. Dad goes on strike, grabs a sign and pickets the living room (Schnier and Chalifour, 2008). Initially, in the script, Dad's placard reads "Strike." This was unacceptable to the French broadcaster. The placard was made bilingual with "Strike" on one side and "En Grêve" on the other. The Canadian specialty channel objected and suggested a pictogram, but it would not approve any of the pictograms proposed. So, rather than lose the story's clarity and visual humor of Dad picketing his own living room, Nadler decided to risk including the sign with just "Strike." The strike sign appeared in two scenes. And in editing the episode the English word was downplayed as much as possible.

This seems at first glance a minor matter. In fact, ultimately the French producers and broadcaster decided that *Negotiation* was one of the episodes they "liked the most." But the editing time, effort, and political capital expended to negotiate the point was a drain on *Family Biz*'s limited resources. *Family Biz* had only one writer/producer on set to supervise production issues like these. In comparison, *Hannah Montana* draws from a writing/producing staff of six. The same French broadcaster also licenses *Hannah Montana* for broadcast. *Hannah Montana* makes no accommodation for international sales to eliminate English wording from its set dressing. For example, its mall and hamburger joint sets are plastered with English signage (e.g. Peterman and Corell, 2008).

In a complication of the English-French issue, the use of French words on screen was seen as detrimental for potential U.S. sales by the Quebec producer. In other words, the Quebec producer identified this visual element and other Canadian imagery (e.g. the blue Canadian five dollar bill) as something that could lead to a disconnect for U.S. audiences and cultural discount for the series. To accommodate French concerns, the high school signage in *Family Biz* was bilingual: "École MacDonald Massey High." To accommodate the Canadian producers' concerns about the cultural discount for the North American version of the series shots with the MacDonald-Massey sign were cropped to eliminate "École." Ironically, one French co-producer was surprised and amused to learn that packaging in Canada is bilingual.

Conclusions: transnationalization of creative production

Family Biz has just begun to air, so whether it is a success commercially or creatively and has overcome the challenges of international co-productions and cultural discount remains to be seen. The series tested extremely well with focus groups in France and has been tentatively renewed for Season Two by its French broadcaster. In Canada, initial ratings were strong but the broadcaster has adopted a wait–and-see approach to whether or not they renew the series. *Family Biz* is a relatively expensive show for the Canadian specialty channel to order and their CTF allocation (a key component of the series' financing) has been reduced this year.

Family Biz has not as yet found a U.S. broadcaster. Neither Nick nor Disney as yet have licensed the series on its completion for their U.S. cable networks. They feel that the show is very high quality and "had a great look" and "many cute moments." Nickelodeon, however, prefers to promote series in which it had an ownership interest and Disney's candid reaction perfectly describes the cultural discount. In a meeting in Los Angeles with the series' producers, one Disney executive referred to the mounted posters of *Hannah Montana* and *That's So Raven* on the walls and simply described Avalon as "She isn't like our girls."

Several Canadian produced series have been sold successfully to U.S. prime time networks in first run in the past two years.[12] *Flashpoint*, the first of these series through the gate, has also sold well internationally (Schneller, 2009). The second such series, *The Listener*, began airing in the U.S. and Canada on June 4, 2009. Interestingly, these series are without exception one hour dramas and mostly variations on the classic police procedural. They were generally licensed (pre-bought) by the U.S. studios/networks. They can, if properly structured like *Flashpoint*, still benefit from the highest level of Canadian content tax credits and funding support from the Canadian Television Fund (CTF, 2008). *Flashpoint* is also notable for unambiguously locating its stories in metropolitan Toronto and showing the Toronto skyline in its opening shot – a pleasant surprise to Ontario audiences who had become resigned to the city's role as body double shooting location.

In the future, the successful Toronto-based producer will find a way to collaborate effectively and leverage the advantages of the U.S. media machine. Arranging strong U.S. creative and production backing seems to be a viable strategy to avoiding the cultural discount. The web of official co-production treaties was designed to ensure that Canadians can tell our own stories. But perhaps the best way to do that and avoid the penalty of cultural discount is to leverage the advantages of an unofficial (non-treaty) co-venture with U.S. partners.

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[12] The series which were developed with US broadcasters are *Flashpoint* (CBS/CTV & Space), *The Listener* (NBC/CTV), *Coppers* (ABC/CanWest Global), *The Bridge* (CBS/CTV), and *Defying Gravity* (Fox/CTV & Space). Series which were developed without early US involvement and "buy in" like *Being Erica, The Guard* and *The Border* tend to end up on smaller US networks like SOAPNet and Ion. It is worth noting that since this paper was originally written that *The Listener* was cancelled by NBC but may continue without US support (Vlessing, 2009).

In the end, does it really matter to the audience where a show is produced? Clearly *Family Biz*, as a trans-cluster, international co-production, was not really produced in Ottawa. The key decisions on the series rested with broadcasters and production partners based in Toronto, Montreal and Paris. As more and more digital technology comes on line in the television industry, the production team and its communication spreads further and further out from the traditional "nexus of production," the studio floor and the geographically-proximate production network. While geographical boundaries seem to disappear, cultural preferences cannot be ignored. New technologies allow for production companies to grow, tapping into more sources of financing and reaching new markets, and yet, as we have shown, geography - where we come from and where we live - impacts directly on the qualities and attractiveness of the media product for consumers.

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