

- BOOK REVIEW -

**Albert Moran. 2013. *TV Format Mogul*. Bristol and Chicago: Intellect.**

For a comprehensive overview of the role that programme-formatting has played over the past 60 years in the global television industry, look no further than Albert Moran's *TV Format Mogul*. Focusing on the broadcasting career of Australian media entrepreneur Reg Grundy, Moran offers insights into the beginnings and development of a number of national broadcast systems, as formatting – first for radio and then for television – came to underpin broadcast schedules throughout the world. In just over a dozen chapters, each with a useful introduction and summary, *TV Format Mogul* traces Grundy's career from his early days working at a Sydney commercial radio station as a presenter, producer, sports-caster and salesman until his retirement in the mid-1990s.

As a young man in the immediate post-World War II era, Grundy was attracted to the glamour of the broadcasting industry and eager to learn about programme production and origination. After a period of presenting on air he found his real talent lay in the business opportunities which broadcasting, and especially television, offered in a time of economic expansion. In 1959, after a dozen years in radio, Grundy moved to television, taking with him a quiz show, *Wheel of Fortune*,<sup>1</sup> which he himself had devised. When Sydney's commercial station, TCN9, offered him an opening as an independent television producer, rather than as a station employee, it changed Grundy's view of his future in the industry.

As Moran shows, despite making limited headway as a content originator, Grundy discovered his forte in formatting and reformatting programmes. After considerable success with game and quiz shows which he sold to a number of other Australian TV stations, the company which he had formed, Reg Grundy Enterprises (later Services), went on to produce and sell a catalogue of dramas, children's series, feature films and soap operas to broadcasters both in Australasia and overseas. However, it was the formatted versions of audience participation programmes and soaps, produced for local environments, which became the real money-spinners and which increased his company's global recognition and profile. By 1995, when he sold to Pearson Television what had become a stable of companies operating under the title Grundy Worldwide, it was the second largest producer of light entertainment television programmes in the world, selling in over 70 countries.

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<sup>1</sup> This was not the programme of the same name devised by American Merv Griffin, which, with different rules, had a long-running success from the 1980s first in the US and later globally.

Beginning in an ad hoc way, programme-formatting had started with radio and involved the adaptation of mainly US audience participation programmes for local environments in other countries. This practice continued when television came on stream. Many producers used US programme formats, often without the knowledge of the originators, although some, like the BBC, made token payments for adaptations. By the late 1970s, after the US signed the Berne Convention on copyrighting, formatting became both a licensed and lucrative way of protecting ownership rights. Grundy had begun adapting American radio quiz shows for Australian listeners while working for Sydney's commercial radio stations 2SM and 2CH. By the mid-1960s, after his move into television, he was making regular trips to the US to watch new television programmes as they went to air, first photographing on-screen images and audiotaping programmes and later, as recording technology developed, video-recording many programmes for Australian consumption.

His fortunes further rose with the increasing deregulation and privatisation of many national broadcast systems so that, whereas Grundy had at first been limited to the Australian commercial broadcasting sector, new markets opened up for him both at home and abroad. Later still, in the multi-channel environment of digitalisation, broadcasters' needs to fill ever more viewing hours offered Grundy countless openings for his catalogue of game shows, quiz shows and soaps. His ability to see and embrace the opportunities which licensed formatting, deregulation, privatisation and later digitalisation offered presented opportunities to expand his business empire from one side of the globe to the other. Grundy's only real disappointment lay in his failure to succeed in the US market, which he had early seen as a great prize. Despite the success of an American reformatted version of the TV series *Prisoner* and despite operating US offices over many years, Grundy's companies never really achieved more than a toe-hold in the US market.

Moran's account of Grundy's business success is both thorough and readable. Though never managing to conduct a face-to-face interview with the subject, Moran's research into his life and career is impressive, as is his knowledge of both Australian broadcasting and the broadcast systems in which Grundy made his sales. Grundy's own memoir, published in 2010, and his responses to questions which Moran faxed to him fill out the picture of a man who devoted his entire working life to pursuing business success. Though he suffered setbacks in his early years when several of his programmes were cancelled by networks, his persistence, drive and business acumen, as well as always developing strategies for shoring up the company against failure, make for an interesting textbook case.

Albert Moran identifies another reason for Grundy's success: a talent for bringing into his company producers and executives with considerable broadcasting experience. Their own contributions over many years were significant. Some produced Grundy programmes and acted as consultants to overseas producers when game shows and

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soap operas were reformatted globally. Other key personnel became senior management in the various companies within the Grundy organisation.

Moran observes that, while success in the Australian media environment launched him, Grundy proved completely unsentimental about his homeland when it came to saving tax dollars as he eyed ever more international opportunities. In 1984, he relocated his home residence to the tax haven of Bermuda. Thus, while Australia might have benefited in less measurable ways from the global attention which Grundy's success bestowed upon Australian films and television programmes, from that period onwards his company ceased to operate there as a good corporate citizen.

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