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# EMBRACING THE NEW: THE RISE OF LOCAL LANGUAGE CONTENT

Is this openness and desire from audiences to watch non-anglophone content a recent phenomenon? Or was it always there?



**ABSTRACT:** What do you mean, it's not in English?! Local language content is currently popular with audiences and seems to be here to stay. What historical, social, and commercial factors have led to this sea change in commissioning and viewing habits, and what are the implications for globalization vendors? This article looks at the rise of non-English source language content, and the importance of the viewer experience when it comes to the localized versions.

**By Dr. Lindsay Bywood, Public Relations Officer, and Sarah Goff,  
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Something has changed in the world of media and entertainment. Audiences who already consume their content — dubbed or subtitled — in languages other than English might have noticed the change later than those who routinely watch anglophone content, but it is hard to ignore. When it comes to production languages, English now shares the limelight with a myriad of others.

Of course, local language content has always featured in most major content providers' offerings, but up until recently, it wasn't as widespread. This current increase seems to have been stimulated by streaming platforms: Netflix commissioned content from 28 different markets in the space of just one quarter in 2022 and other VOD platforms are clearly demonstrating a similar focus.

Starting with the launch of cable and satellite television and continuing with the advent of streaming

platforms, viewers have been handed the opportunity to access a wide variety of content. As a result, the delivery and consumption of entertainment on offer has changed. Non-linear viewing opened the door to new release schedules and the possibility of accessing back catalogues, which would have been unthinkable in the days of purely terrestrial channels. And audiences have enthusiastically seized the opportunity.

The modern world's connected nature and the improved facility for giving feedback mean that content providers are now much more in-tune with viewers' preferences and audiences can communicate directly with those responsible for choosing their entertainment. Viewers take to social media to discuss the quality of localized versions, including casting decisions, at times garnering the attention of the global press. The increased

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focus on diversity and inclusion that we've seen throughout the industry over the past decade is also an apparent hot topic when it comes to viewing behavior. It is natural for individuals to want to see relatable people and cultures and the content producers are focused on this too, bolstering content that is more inclusive and representative of a wider cultural spread.

Some of the rise in local language content has also been a result of legislative pressure. EU regulations state that for broadcasters and streamers operating within the territory, 30 percent of the content they produce must be from EU countries to promote cultural diversity within the Union. This currently still includes the UK, but that may change when the rules are reassessed in 2024. Other countries, such as China and Canada, have similar requirements for local programming that may influence purchasing and programming decisions, leading to more culturally diverse content available in these countries.

The global shock administered by the pandemic rippled through the audiovisual content industry, as it did the world. As production slowed down, content owners were forced to innovate to keep their offerings fresh and varied, looking to their back catalogues for inspiration. Local content had started to be commissioned and produced in different territories and streaming platforms could now look to leverage this content in wider, global markets. This reinforced the ramping up of non-English-source content for localization and distribution in other markets.

Perhaps the most interesting question this development provokes, and the most difficult to definitively answer, relates to the social and cultural shift that it highlights. Is this openness and desire from audiences to watch non-anglophone content a recent phenomenon or was it always there? One of the most striking observations is the appearance of dubbed and subtitled programs

in English-speaking homes. Historically, there was understandably less need for localization in these markets since so much entertainment content was produced in the U.S. or UK. When it came to non-English content, the attitude was that these viewers were less likely to consume it as it wasn't something they were familiar with. Viewers could be put off by the atypical experience of consuming dubs or subtitles and would need to feel that the localized versions weren't a translation in order to enjoy it. At the same time, there appeared to be an underlying assumption that watching translated content was somehow inferior to watching it in the original production language. The current trend does not seem to bear those assumptions out, however, since dubbed and subtitled content such as "Squid Game," "Casa de Papel" ("Money Heist"), Parasite and "Deutschland 83/86/89" have proved highly popular and show no signs of waning in popularity.

While localizing into English is far from a new requirement, this change in attitude towards content produced in other languages has exposed a need to further ramp up the amount of talent and resources in the localization pool to support the continually evolving demand. Translators, and by extension subtitlers, into English have historically been thinner on the ground compared with professionals working from English. To ensure a seamless viewing experience, it's also key that dubbing adapters and directors are highly skilled, to produce a dubbed version that resonates with audiences unused to them.

At VSI, we understand that as the world continues to become more globalized and people more interested in different cultures, one thing is certain: international content will continue to seep into new territories. That also comes with a focus on diversity in representation, where different accents and dialects must be heard, and race, ethnicity, disability, sexuality, and gender identity are



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better reflected. We've been here from the start, not only pioneering English dubbing from our studio facilities in Los Angeles and London but leading the way in multilingual localization from our global studios. We know that the audience experience is key and for more than 30 years, we have developed a strong talent pool, be it voice artists, directors, adapters, translators, graphic artists, transcreators and more, so that we can quickly move with the changes in the market but also ensure we deliver the highest-quality localized versions for our clients and their global audiences.

We are living in exciting times. It seems that the English-speaking audience for local language content will continue to grow as the publicity around the high-profile releases snowballs and more and more viewers are exposed to a plethora of ideas and stories from across the globe. Other territories have embraced content that is not originally made in English as long as it is well localized. It is likely there will be a knock-on effect in the wider industry, with more subtitlers and dubbing professionals localizing into English. One thing is for sure, this phenomenon acts as proof of that oft-repeated adage: the main thing the audience cares about is the story. For today's audiences, it is paramount that their experience of that story is authentic, something that is only possible through top-quality localization. ■

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