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“Globalization and the mass media” in Wiley-Blackwell’s *Encyclopaedia of Globalization*, 2012
Dr. Carolina Matos

The mass media are seen today as playing a key role in enhancing globalization, facilitating culture exchange and multiple flows of information and image between countries through international news broadcasts, television programming, new technologies, film and music. If before the 1990’s mainstream media systems in most countries of the world were relatively national in scope, since then most communication media have become increasingly global, extending their reach beyond the nation-state to conquer audiences worldwide. International flows of information have been largely assisted by the development of global capitalism, new technologies and the increasing commercialisation of global television, which has occurred as a consequence of the deregulation policies adopted by various countries in Europe and the US in order to permit the proliferation of cable and satellite channels.

Globalization theorists have discussed how the cultural dimension of globalization has exercised a profound impact on the whole globalization process. The rapid expansion of global communications in the 21st century can be traced back to the mechanical advancements of technologies during the course of the 18th and 19th centuries, which started mainly with the invention of the telegraph in 1837, and included the growth in postal services, cross-border telephone and radio communications and the creation of a modern mass circulation press in Europe.

It was however the evolution of technologies capable of transmitting messages via electromagnetic waves that marked a turning point in advancing the globalization of communications. The emergence of international news agencies in the 19th century, such as Reuters, paved the way for the beginnings of a global system of codification. Nonetheless, it was not until the 1960’s, with the launch of the first geo-stationary communication satellites, that communication by electromagnetic transmission became fully global, thus making the globalization of communications a distinctive phenomena of the 20th century (Thompson, 1995, 159).

a) From modernization and development theories to cultural imperialism

Key theories in international communications grew out of international relation studies. The “modernization” or development” theory in the area of communication research emerged in the Cold War context and were largely preoccupied with the ways in which the media could help transform traditional societies to include them into the capitalism orbit. Among the key theorists in this tradition was Wilbur Schramm with his sponsored UNESCO work, *Mass Media and national development – the role of information in the developing countries*. The idea was that international communication media could be used as a tool to transfer the political-economic model of the West to the growing independent societies of the South. Schramm’s views was that the mass media could be used by elites to raise the ambitions of the populations in developing countries, who would cease to be narrow-minded and conformist and would be active in their own self-development.

The dependency theories the 1960’s and 1970’s were perceived as an alternative approach grounded in neo-Marxism, and which adopted a theoretical framework that saw capitalism and inequality as a key perspective in understanding the impact of power relations on global communications. According to the argument, transnational corporations based in the North engaged in a web of interdependency with the economies of the South, setting the terms of global trade, dominating markets, production and labour. Dependency theorists and Latin American scholars argued that these economic relations worked within an exploitative dependency model that promoted American capitalist mentality in developing countries (Mattelart, 1979). Development was thus shaped in a way that benefitted largely the developed nations, maintaining the peripheral countries in a continuous position of dependence. Latin American scholars stressed that it was Western media companies that were reaping the rewards of the modernization programmes, and that they were actually reaching out to the South in order to conquer new markets for their products.

Globalization is thus seen as having consequences for the distribution of power and wealth both within and between countries. Cultural imperialism theories of the 1970’s and 1980’s highlighted how the media in developing countries imported foreign news, cultural and television genre formats (i.e. talk-shows, sitcoms) and also values of capitalist consumerism and individualism. The core critique of the imperialism thesis was that the developing countries had established a relationship of subordination in relation to the First World countries that had historical roots in European colonialism, culminating in a *core-*

periphery relationship. Key media imperialism theses also affirmed that external factors, such as the expansion of transnational corporations and the strategic planning of the US government, shaped the historical evolution of commercial broadcasting systems in Latin American countries.

One of the main theorists in the cultural imperialism tradition was Herbert Schiller (1969), who argued that the pursuit of commercial interests by US-based transnational corporations was serving to undermine the cultural autonomy of countries of the South. Schiller saw the US developing an imperialist control of the world through the mass media. Schiller's cultural imperialism theory was highly influential and was updated later by many theorists. A group of Latin American scholars, such as Armand Mattelart (1979), also criticised it from within. Many Latin American scholars were critical of the "modernization" perspective and the idea that the Western media entry in the Third World would contribute to national development.

Oliver Boyd-Barrett (1977, 1998) revised the media imperialism thesis to defend its relevance in the context of increasing media globalization. In spite of some of the limitations of the cultural imperialism theory, like its tendency to suggest a "hypodermic needle" model of American values being injected into the Third World, Boyd-Barrett stressed that its merit rested in the fact that it was concerned with inequalities between nations and how this reflected wider political and economic problems of dependency. However, it did not acknowledge fully intra-national media relations and other ways in which the media contributed to oppression based on class, gender and race, having also not stressed patterns of ownership and technical structures (174).

International news agencies like Reuters, AP, UPI and AFP have been assigned a role by media scholars of having contributed in spreading a global agenda and in creating particular perceptions of the South as being a place of "corruption, coup and disaster" for Western audiences. The United Nations Educational, Social and Cultural Organisation (Unesco) was during the 1970's and 1980's a key body in the debate on international communications. The news agencies came specifically under attack by Third World critics during the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO). The Western dominance of news broadcasting was perceived as reproducing the prejudices of colonialism.

The allegations made against the Western news agencies were that they did not cover enough the developing countries, the material covered was inadequate and the tendency was to reinforce a biased image. These perspectives were rejected by the representatives of

the US and the UK, who felt threatened by requests for balanced free flows and thus withdrew their support from Unesco. Groups committed to alternative communications and to a policy of correcting distortions in the mainstream media's coverage of news from developing countries, and which were led by many NGOs and other social movements both in the West and in the South, sprang up in the aftermath of the NWICO debates.

These four agencies nonetheless remain key players who dominate the global dissemination of news and information, with many newspapers and other media organisations across the world depending on them for international news. They are seen as central to the globalisation thesis and are closely tied to the modernization of the West and the expansion of communication media since their emergence in the mid-19th century. The limited number of agencies and producers of sources for international news, so academics claim, has also contributed towards the homogenization of global culture and of international television news content by privileging Western interests in politics, economics and culture. They have also helped shape the relationship between internalization and local forces, bringing the global to the local and vice-versa through their news gathering activities as well as constructing international agendas that influence national governments. As authors note, the unevenness of flows thus reflects the historical legacy of these institutions and is still detected today in international communications, in spite of the existence of multiple and reverse flows from the Third to the First World.

Due to the rise of post-modernism theories, the adoption of neo-liberal discourse by US and UK governments from the 1980's onwards, followed by the fall of the "grand narratives", considered part of the modernist discourse that prevailed in the 1970's, the cultural imperialism thesis went into decline. This perspective came under attack from various fronts due to its focus on exclusive American cultural dominance and a historical context closely tied to the Cold War paradigm. The theory is not considered adequate anymore to fully explain the shifting economic and media environment of the last decades, which has seen the growth of the Asian tigers, the restructuring of the European powers and the multiplication of media corporations which are no longer exclusively American.

Thompson (1995, 169) has underlined the necessity to articulate a more elaborate account that recognises how symbolic power overlaps with the economic and the political in the globalization process, emphasising how the appropriation of globalised media products interacts with localized practices which can either serve to consolidate relations of power or create new forms of dependency. Schiller has also updated his work, acknowledging that the power structures of the 1960's had changed, but underlined that

cultural domination remained American in form and content whilst the economic basis had become internationalised.

Another critique made to the cultural and media imperialism thesis has come from the cultural studies and audience reception research tradition, which claims that people do not simply adopt uncritically US values and culture from watching American programmes. Audience research states that people use media creatively and according to their own needs, and that audiences should not be understood as being “cultural dopes”. They can negotiate dominant ideological messages and make readings that are empowering for their everyday lives. Studies in the audience research tradition have shown how diverse ethnic groups read and make sense of US television exported texts, from *Dallas* to *The Simpson* and *Sex and the City*, differently, according to their own cultural preferences and socio-economic context.

According to Herman and McChesney (2004), the active audience perspective gives credit to the resistance to media globalization and commercialization, but it tends to undermine the perspectives associated with the “grand narrative” in favour of micro textual analyses, assuming that the audience is always a co-producer and dismissing the consequences over time of de-politicization as a result of a media entertainment-led diet. Others assert also that it is also wrong to presuppose that every American programme or cultural product is necessarily packed with consumerist capitalist values, and that there is no diversity and complexity in the type of US cultural production and the ways in which it is received by audiences in different countries. Some of the reasons in favour of the cultural imperialism approach, as highlighted by critics like Tomlinson (1999), is the fact that its critical aspect allows one to grasp the real nature of global culture and the expansionist aspect of capitalism.

b) Cultural globalization theories: from homogenization to hybridity

The cultural imperialism theories of the 1960’s and 1970’s have thus given way to the “cultural globalization” perspectives which have predominated media scholarship in the 90’s, indicating for some a shift away from a more neo-Marxist rigid one-way model of cultural domination towards a more sophisticated analysis and appreciation of “multidirectional flows” across countries, acknowledging the emergence of regional markets, the resistance of media audiences to American culture and the diversity in the

forms of engagement with media texts. Various theorists have updated the cultural imperialism theories nonetheless in the context of the persistence of inequalities of power and wealth between countries, the unevenness of flows and increasing media concentration and commercialisation, arguing for its relevance still in the context of the expanding power of transnational media corporations situated in the rich West.

The extent to which the mass media have assisted in reinforcing American cultural supremacy throughout the world due to the dominance of Hollywood films and the export of US television series continues to be the subject of debate. In the context of the decline of the cultural imperialism thesis, most critics have moved away from understanding global culture as synonymous with *homogenization*, or cultural synchronization or “McDonaldization”, recognising diversity and the impact of reverse flows on Western cultures. Here *homogenization* is understood as the degree of convergence of media systems towards formats that originated in the US.

National media systems were considered predominant until the 1970’s, giving rise to concerns that a single global media model was taking over since the 1990’s. The main features of this growing convergence towards the liberal American model are a weakening of government intervention and decline of the role of the state in communications, with a move towards market regulation, commercialization and the predominance of Anglo-American journalistic professionalism, accompanied by the crisis of the public service broadcasting tradition in Europe.

Critics assert that a global media system is not replacing national communication media, as there are still distinctive differences between political systems and cultural particularities which prevent complete homogenization. Cultural globalization theorists have thus underscored the need to recognise the blending of local cultures with global foreign influences, switching to an understanding of global culture as being grounded in a process of *hybridization*, and not *homogenization* or simply cultural diffusion of American values. The concept of “hybridization” is seen by cultural globalization theorists (i.e. Nederveen Pieterse, 2004) as more suited to understand the complexity of flows and the “cultural mixing” of current globalization processes.

Nederveen Pieterse (2004) sees hybridity as being part of a certain “postmodern sensibility”, a contemporary reaction to racial purity and tight nation border controls and a liberation from the West’s historical legacy of Eurocentric thinking and colonialism. Furthermore, it is believed that certain credit should be given to American popular culture and the reasons for its appeal to a global audience, which can be precisely the result of its

capacity to mingle multiple cultures that reflect the US' current hybrid cultural identity and its historical formation as an immigrant's country. The hybridization argument thus contends that the impact of global culture does not lead to the extinction of the local. Hybrid styles are in essence a result of the combination of modern techniques or American influences with national and political traditions or regional identities.

Within this line of argument, theorists have also criticised how the cultural imperialism thesis paid little attention to the notion of *reverse flows* between the First and Third Worlds. Some see this as a result of a reverse type of colonization, including the example of the export of Brazilian *telenovelas* to Portugal, as well as the emergence of regional media markets and cultural production and distribution centres in developing countries, such as the Bollywood film industry in India. Large broadcasters like TV Globo in Brazil and Televisa in Mexico have also managed to provide global competition, engaging in what some see as a form of *reverse cultural imperialism*, with the exportation of the *telenovela* genre to the Latin American community in a world market. Comparative research has also continuously pointed out how in Europe the dominant preference is for domestic programming, and how US programmes usually are not sought after as much as national content.

This perspective on hybridity has also encountered criticism on the grounds that it reflects a reluctance in looking at economic power and the impact of giant media corporations in directing the cultural preference (Curran, 2002). Furthermore, the result of the blending of global with national influences does not in the end constitute "authentic" cultural practice, but rather the commodification and appropriation of the "exotic" by capitalist media corporations which can sell these "multicultural" products in a global market. Examples here can include world music to Bollywood films and tourism paraphernalia. Difference and diversity is thus exploited by the global market to make profit, and not because of a genuine appreciation of other non-Western or Third World cultures.

Neverdeen Pieterse (2004, 99) has however criticised the arguments against hybridity as being rooted in a "Marxism versus cultural studies" premises and aligned with the general attacks on "postmodernism", which see multiculturalism and global culture as a triumph of advanced capitalism and the struggle for recognition and inclusion of hybrids and cosmopolitans, seen as belonging exclusively to "elite groups", as being less important than the fight for working-class emancipation. Cultures should be seen as hybrid, whilst cultural hybridity is a contemporary reality for both the working and middle classes and is rooted in

the history of mankind, which has been one of constant immigration, cross bordering, cultural exchanges and intermarriages.

Thus as a consequence of increasing media globalization and expanding multiculturalism in the West, Western self-identities are becoming to be more in contact with the postcolonial “Other”. This contributes to challenge unquestioned cultural and assumptions about particular groups, mainly rigid racial and cultural stereotypes fixed in place, that were constructed during the colonial order to justify the colonial project and the West’s cultural power and superiority in relation to the rest of the world. As various theorists state, given the decline of Western imperialism and the complexities of the flows between people, trade and culture across the world has made the image of globalization be one of a decentred network of unstable and shifting patterns of power distribution, which has both undermined the core-periphery model.

Global communication systems have thus changed the relationship between localities and social circumstances. Globalization theorists such as Held (1999) have also noted how global communication media have facilitated what he calls the emergence of cultural cosmopolitanism, or a cosmopolitan sensibility, due to the increasing speed and intensity of its functioning. As the argument goes, the image provided by the media of distant events and of how people from other parts of the world live has resulted in a celebration of difference, stimulating a cosmopolitan orientation in sectors of the public, the formation of a global civil society, global public sphere or international community, although on the other hand global media and the increasing global flow of people and goods across borders has not destroyed local ties.

Thus awareness of cultural difference is a consequence of accelerated globalization of communications, increasing mobility, migration, trade, investment and tourism. Global firms thus engage in marketing strategies (i.e. *Think globally, act locally!*) in order to respond to these multiple identities acquired by increasing global citizens, with international companies such as MTV adapting their brand and content programming to suit local tastes and identities.

Another important term used in cultural globalization theory to discuss the relationship between global and local influences is the concept of “deterritorialization”. As various theorists state, deterritorialization opens up new markets for film companies to explore the life stories of diasporic communities and the need of these deterritorialized populations for contact with their homeland. This has been another line of research which is slowly receiving more attention from media scholars, mainly minority media production and the

complexity of cultural flows across national borders. From the 80's onwards, satellite television has created the means for the catering to these geo-cultural groups in the host countries of Europe and the US, with new communication technologies assisting also diasporic communities in their urge to stay in touch with news and relatives from their native lands.

The fact that media systems are transcending the barriers of the nation-state has stimulated globalization theorists to see media globalization as necessarily contributing to erode the power of countries to control, regulate and/or use their media for educational and cultural purposes within national boundaries. Globalization is seen to have changed the very nature of the previous strong relationship that existed between the media and the state. The state continues to matter because it can still play a role in shaping media policy and national television systems. In Europe for instance the state has had a tradition of regulating public service broadcasting in an attempt to use the media to enhance the public good and to provide education and culture to wider sectors of the population independent of social status and economic income. The increase in power of multinational media conglomerates has meant that the state has been undermined in its capacity to subordinate them to a regulatory regime.

The expansion of new technologies has thus had a major role in the intensification of the globalization of communications in the late 20th century, with the deployment of sophisticated cable and satellite systems. The former has facilitated the capacity for transmission of electronic information and the latter for long-distance communications, and this has been combined with the increase in use of digital methods of information processing. Thus the digitalization of information and the development of electronic technologies has increased the capacity to store information, permitting the convergence of information and communication technologies.

Since the 1990's, deregulation trends in the US and in many European countries concerning broadcasting policy have seen the opening of the television market to cable and satellite as well as the intensification of media concentration in the West through the formation of mergers and between powerful media companies, such as American Online and Time Warner. Technological advancements in computing and telecommunications have enabled media organisations to operate globally and to distribute their products, with the state losing power in regulating what people can watch.

Global media today are thus moving across borders and building alliances with local forms. Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation has had an extensive reach, with subsidiaries

in Europe, the US, Asia and Australia. Much of what audiences worldwide receive from the media comes from a small number of corporations, like News Corporation, Disney, Time Warner, Viacom and ITC and associated press agencies (CNN, BBC, Reuters, AP, UPI, Bloomberg). News Corporation owns the Fox channel, *The Times* and *The Sun* newspapers. Murdoch has managed to expand his global media empire through the successful establishment of satellite TV systems worldwide. By the 1990's, Murdoch claimed to have TV networks and systems that reached more than 75% of the world's population, having launched satellite systems in Latin America, Japan and India and established agreements with national media systems, including with TV Globo in Brazil, as well as conquering markets in China and India. Murdoch is seen by critics as being too powerful, and of attempting to influence national and global politics, including the case of the wooing of the support of *The Sun* for Tony Blair's election in 1997.

The concentration of media firms in the hands of few owners is pointed out by critics as threatening diversity, impeding real competition, forcing smaller players out of the market, and contributing to reinforce conservative views of the world, marginalising dissent or content that does not generate profit or which is seen as challenging to capitalist values. Boyd-Barrett (1998) has argued for a re-conceptualization of imperialism as a process of *colonization of communication space*, highlighting that such a phrase helps us understand which voices get to be heard and which are excluded, making one conscious of communication space as a site of struggle.

Although the media industries are not exclusively American anymore as the cultural imperialism thesis would sustain, the global media system today is largely owned by various Western corporations (Japanese, German, British, American), with none of them coming from any of the developing countries, either Asia or South America. Thus in spite of the recognition of reverse flows and that global media companies are not necessarily all American, the case for still understanding cultural globalization through the concept of "Americanization" is still a persuasive one if one looks at global (American) media symbols such as CNN, the success that Hollywood blockbusters encounter worldwide and the exportation of American television series internationally.

The US is seen as a model of commercial media to which all other countries, including Europe with its tradition of strong public service broadcasting, are moving towards. The shift in Europe towards commercialization was influenced by American policy and US interests. US programmes are still the predominant non-domestic viewing in most European states, with South European as well as Latin American countries having the

highest imports of American programming. Satellite and cable channels, including Sky and MTV, also contain large amounts of US programming. In the case of Latin America, the origins of a market-oriented US style of press can be traced back to the years when South American economies were entering the industrial order.

Herman and McChesney (2004) argue that the *global media market* is still dominated by US interests and by the US domestic market. The whole global media system has come to be dominated by 9 or 10 companies: Time Warner, Disney, Bertelsman, Viacom, Tele-Communications INC, News Corporation, Sony, Seagram, General Electric and Philips. They develop in their three tier model of global media Schiller's revised understanding of cultural imperialism as being "transnational cultural domination", indicating the shift away from American hegemony towards transnational capitalism and presenting a picture of globalization as a process driven "from above" by giant media corporations supported by deregulation policies of various states. They advocate wider media democratization "from below" and media reform. According to the authors, the global media market is characterised by oligopolistic market competition and is linked to the rise of the global capitalist economic system, having been encouraged by new digital technologies and by the institutions of global capitalism, like the World Bank.

The 24 hour international news agency CNN, owned by Ted Turner and seen as the embodiment of the ultimate global media corporation, started to transmit instant news from Gulf War 1 in 1991. Since then scholars have talked about the potential effects that CNN can have on policy-making (the so-called "CNN effect") and the ways in which its global reporting can have an influence on US foreign policy. CNN broadcast news around the world via a combination of satellites and cable television outlets and was praised for its successful usage of the newest news-gathering technology, the satellite-fed connection. In the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the Qatar based television station *Al Jazeera*, which had been launched in 1996, started to compete with CNN and other international broadcasters, and to provide an alternative network of news about the war. It also strengthened its position in the Arab world as a forum of debate of non-Western views, which for some could assist in challenging the hegemony of American culture and their views on foreign policy.

Critics also affirm that transnational media are eroding national media. International satellite TV and video for instance is said to be weakening the Bombay film industry, whilst in Brazil TV Globo has seen a decline in its viewership, power and influence due both to competition from international cable and satellite channels. In terms of what gets

globalized, this includes fiction, music, television genres which are considered to have originated in the US, such as talk-shows, TV news programmes, sitcoms and comedy as well as “infotainment”. The latter is seen as being a mixture of information with entertainment, and is a consequence of the growing commercialization of the media worldwide and the economic pressures which media corporations end up imposing on current affairs to make them more attractive to larger audiences.

Transformations in international communication have created the perception for many of increased interconnectedness, of a shrinking of the world. New media technologies and the Internet have intensified this interconnectedness between countries and the rapid spread of information, news, content and programming. Neo-Marxists scholars such as Mattelart and Castells have examined the process of globalization by questioning the impact of technological developments on the ways in which societies, cultures and individuals function and understand themselves. Marshall McLuhan (1911-80) nonetheless was one of the first thinkers to analyse the impact of media technology on society, articulating a theory considered ground-breaking when it came out in the 1960’s, and which consisted in basically saying that the rise of new communication technologies would culminate in the creation of a “global village” capable of enhancing international understanding between people and forging new communities.

Computerized technology, satellite TV and the Internet have also contributed to the reduction of the cost of communications, stimulating home-made productions and gradually widening the access of many to these technologies. In his discussion of the impact of technologies on everyday life, Castells (2000), considered one of the main philosophers of cyberspace, has shown how the Internet has revolutionized international information exchange due to its ability in moving data across borders. He has also pointed out how the Internet has become well suited for the expanding individualism of contemporary reality, with consumers using the web to create their own content and distribute it to global audiences. The Internet is also seen as strengthening the cultural identities of diasporic peoples, as well as assisting in social networking and in forging ties with like-minded individuals, social groups and various communities across the globe.

In contrast to other communication media, the Internet has been the fastest-growing sector of the media. The expansion of the Internet has been enormous: there were 20 million users in 1995 and 400 million by the year 2000. By 2006, the Internet was considered a global medium, jumping from reaching 3% of the world’s population to more

than 15%, mostly in the developed countries, with North America having a penetration rate of 30% and Europe and the Asia-Pacific with 30% as well (Thussu, 2006, 208).

Media corporations have been heavily investing in the convergence between the Internet and television and in communication strategies that operate across platforms. American Online and Time Warner for instance merged in 2000 to create an Internet-based media giant which brought together both the old and new media, including film, television, radio, publishing and computing. Giant web portals have also emerged and are contributing to concentrate information, access and profits, with Google “revolutionizing” the way information is processed and used across the world.

Significant inequalities remain nonetheless in the capacity of individuals to have access to the Internet and to new communication technologies, both in developing countries as well as within different social strata of advanced societies. This was a central concern of the cultural imperialism debates in the 1970’s, but the issue of the “digital divide” has become much more of a pressing issue now in the current context of expanding globalization of new technologies and inequality in their distribution. Many developing countries in the South for instance cannot meet the high costs of initial investment in the updating of their telecommunications systems and in the buying of equipment and software.

The Internet has had a significant political role in facilitating the connection between groups, assisting the activities of social movements in organising “anti-globalization” protests and the mobilization of NGOs and political parties of civil society groups and voters. It has emerged as a key medium, alongside alternative communications and public media, which is seen by many media scholars, journalists and social activists as being capable of widening media democratization worldwide, of revitalising the public sphere and of functioning mainly as a resistance to the dominance of global communications by a few corporations interested mainly in entertainment and profits.

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