

Peripheral vision: world regional television markets in the satellite age

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Resumo

Este trabalho esboça os novos padrões de fluxo no intercâmbio de programas de TV possibilitados pelos serviços de satélites internacionais e que estão essencialmente baseados em similaridades lingüísticas e culturais.

Palavras-chave: mercados regionais, países periféricos, fluxos de programas de TV, serviços de satélites internacionais

Resumen

El desarrollo de fuertes mercados regionales en partes del mundo consideradas como "periféricas" peden la revisión del concepto de "imperialismo cultural". Este estudio presenta los nuevos modelos de flujos en el intercambio de programas de televisión ahora posibilitado por servicios de satélites internacionales, esencialmente baseados en similaridades lingüísticas y culturales.

Palabras-clave: mercados regionales, países periféricos, flujos de programas de televisión, servicios de satélites internacionales

Abstract

This papers outlines the new patterns of flow in television program exchange enabled by international satellite services, and substantially based on linguistic and cultural similarities.

Keywords: regional markets, peripheral countries, television program flows, international satellites services

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A sea-change in television systems around the world began in the late 1970s. An integral element in the various complex phenomena usually captured under the rubric of 'globalization', this transformation has forced the West to confront the television cultures of the more 'peripheral' regions of the world. Shifting geo-political patterns within the world system, most notably the partial dismantling of national boundaries in Europe, the demise of communism and the rise of the Asian economies, are having a profound effect on cultural ecologies and the consequent receptiveness of many regions of the world to new cultural influences, including new sources and kinds of television. Alongside this, and related to it, the last ten years have seen major changes in the television cultures of many countries as technological innovation, industrial realignments and modifications in regulatory philosophy have begun to produce a new audiovisual landscape.

The transformation of the audiovisual landscape

At the forefront of the technological changes in broadcasting has been the satellite, which abolished distance and allowed for the first time the linking of remote territories into new viewing communities. There is no doubt that the satellite has acted as a kind of 'Trojan horse' of media liberalization. Although evidence from Europe and elsewhere indicates that satellite services originating outside national borders do not usually attract levels of audience that would really threaten traditional national viewing patterns, the ability of satellite delivery to transgress borders has been enough to encourage generally otherwise reluctant governments to allow greater internal commercialization and competition.

In Asia, the most significant innovation has undoubtedly been the advent of STAR TV, the pan-Asian satellite service which operates out of Hong Kong. Asian television cultures traditionally have been heavily controlled politically and protected from a high level of Western programming, but STAR TV has introduced them to new sources of programming, especially from the West, and exposed them to diverse sources of news reporting. Although at first sight the advent of STAR TV seemed to demonstrate that attempts by nations to control their television space would be fruitless, in fact several Asian governments have negotiated various means to maintain control, usually involving some arrangement to check the signal before retransmitting it.

In this new era, global, regional, national and even local circuits of program exchange overlap and interact in a multi-faceted way, no doubt with a great variety of cultural effects which are impossible to conceptualize within the more concentric perspective appropriate to previous decades. Instead of the image of 'the West' at the centre dominating the peripheral 'Third World' with an outward flow of cultural products, we now can see the world as divided into a number of regions which each have their own internal dynamics as well as their global ties. Although primarily based on

geographic realities, these regions are also defined by common cultural, linguistic and historical connections which transcend physical space. Such a dynamic regionalist view of the world helps us to analyse in a more nuanced way the intricate and multi-directional flows of television across the globe.

By the mid-1980s it had become evident that the 'cultural imperialism' discourse within which international cultural influence had been framed, had serious inadequacies, both as theory and in terms of the reality which the theory purported to explain. Actual transformation of the world television system made it less and less sustainable on the empirical level, and shifting theoretical paradigms, including postmodernism, postcolonialism, and theories of the 'active' audience, made its conceptual foundations less secure (McAnany and Wilkinson 1992; Naficy 1993; Sinclair 1990; Tomlinson 1991).

To take the empirical aspect first: even in Latin America, virtually the cradle of the theorization of cultural imperialism, US imports were prominent only in the early stages. As the industry matured in Latin America, and as it developed 'critical mass', US imports were to a significant extent replaced by local products, a pattern that can be found repeated many times over around the world, and is currently shaping Europe's new privately-owned services. Of course, not all countries in Latin America have the capacity to develop sizable indigenous television production industries. Rather, the pattern in Latin America, as in Asia and the Middle East, is that each 'geolinguistic region' as we shall call them, is itself dominated by one or two centres of audiovisual production - Mexico and Brazil for Latin America, Hong Kong and Taiwan for the Chinese-speaking populations of Asia, Egypt for the Arab world, and India for the Indian populations of Africa and Asia. The Western optic through which the cultural imperialism thesis was developed literally did not see these non-Western systems of regional exchange, nor understand what they represented.

Other shortcomings arose from the theory's emphasis on external forces from the US, and the corresponding disregard for the internal sociological factors within the countries seen to be subject to them. In its eagerness to hold US companies, and behind them, the US government, responsible for regressive sociocultural changes in the 'Third World', the cultural imperialism critique neglected the internal historical and social dynamics within the countries susceptible to their influence. This left out of consideration the strategic social structural position of the individuals and interest groups who benefitted from facilitating US market entry or even from taking their own initiatives. Some of these have subsequently built up their own international media empires, some notable cases of which will be mentioned further on.

Cultural imperialism theory failed to see that, more fundamental than its supposed ideological influence, the legacy of the US in world television development was in the implantation of its systemic model for

television as a medium - the exploitation of entertainment content so as to attract audiences which could then be sold to advertisers. American content may have primed this process, but as the experience of many parts of the peripheral world shows, it is not required to sustain it.

If the discourse of cultural imperialism has proven inadequate to understand the more complex international patterns of television production, distribution and consumption as they became evident in the 1980s, and the responses which audiences make to the television available to them, what new theories have become available which might serve these purposes? As Richard Collins has observed, there has been no adequate replacement for the fallen 'dominant ideology paradigm' in which cultural imperialism theory had grounded its view of the world (1990, pp. 4-5). One important reason for this is that in the process by which postmodernism has succeeded neo-marxism as the master paradigm in social and cultural theory, the new orthodoxy has taught us to be sceptical of such 'grand narratives' or totalizing theories as that of cultural imperialism.

Yet, it must also be said that within postmodernism itself, there is no clear theoretical model with which to understand the international trade in television programs. On the contrary, postmodernism has tended to valorize the fractured cultural meanings of all images and goods, and to conflate the actual processes by which they are produced, distributed and consumed. In this context, it is ironic to recall the exhortation of Jorge Schement and his colleagues more than a decade ago that we disengage from the 'grand theory' of both the 'free flow' and the 'American hegemony' paradigms in favour of Robert Merton's 'theory of the middle range' (1984), yet this appears to be just the level of abstraction to which we should now climb down.

Home on the middle range: geolinguistic regions

A striking feature of the new international media landscape beyond the traditional anglophone centre is the consolidation of the trend to regional markets. The resulting situation is not the passive homogenization of world television which cultural imperialism theorists feared, but rather, the heterogenization. Within the anglophone world, Australia and Canada, and even the UK, produce programs which have assimilated the genre conventions of US television, but with their own look and feel. Outside of it, US genres have been adapted beyond recognition in a dynamic process of cultural syncretism: the MGM musical within the Hindi movie; and the US soap opera in the Latin American *telenovela*.

It is cultural similarities in general, not just language in particular, that binds geolinguistic regions into television markets. Pan-Sino cultural elements allow programs produced in Cantonese to cross easily into Mandarin, just as Spanish and Portuguese readily translate into each other in 'Latin' markets. Religion, music, humour, costume, nonverbal codes and

narrative modes are all elements in what Joe Straubhaar calls 'cultural proximity'. He hypothesizes that audiences will first seek the pleasure of recognition of their own culture in their program choices, and that programs will be produced to satisfy this demand, relative to the wealth of the market. Straubhaar argues that in general:

"audiences will tend to prefer that programming which is closest or most proximate to their own culture: national programming if it can be supported by the local economy, regional programming in genres that small countries cannot afford. The U.S. continues to have an advantage in genres that even large Third World countries cannot afford to produce, such as feature films, cartoons, and action-adventure series" (1992, pp. 14-15).

This is consistent with Hoskins and McFadyen's prognosis that US production will continue to increase, finding its strength especially in the prosperous 'North American/ West European/Australasian market' but that it will also 'constitute a smaller share of an expanding market' in world terms as regional and national production also expands (1991, p.221). This expansion will occur to the extent that competitors also develop comparative advantages such as the US has enjoyed historically. As well as dominance of the largest market within a geolinguistic region, these include economies of scale, high levels of commercialization, and 'first mover advantage', especially where that is based on technical and stylistic innovation. Thus, with the important proviso that the flow of peripheral production is not so much displacing US production as finding its own, intermediate level, the way is open to inquire into how these levels might be impacting upon the cultural identification and restratification of television audiences on a global scale.

'Globalization': more than meets the eye

While it is fundamental that we recognize the new patterns of television program exchange and service distribution to be global in their scale, this does not mean that we must therefore conceive of them in any facile framework of 'globalization'. Globalization has already become a cliché that it is high time to move beyond, and analysis of the new patterns discernible in global television show a useful way in which this can be done.

Discussions of globalization often counterpose the global with the local, and the local is in turn equated with the national. However, in the analysis of television production and distribution on a world scale, it is important to distinguish not just the local from the national, but the regio-

nal from the global. Of these distinct but related levels, it is the local and the regional which have been most neglected in the literature to date. We need to give more attention to the local characteristics of the television industries of significant non-metropolitan countries that have built a presence outside their own borders. This includes the phenomenon of 'contra-flow' (Boyd-Barrett and Kishan Thussu 1992), where countries once thought of as major 'victims' of media imperialism, such as Mexico, Canada and Australia, have successfully exported their programs and personnel into the metropolis - the empire strikes back.

Similarly, we need to give more recognition to the regional level, and the national within the context of the regional, where 'region' must now be understood to be geolinguistic and cultural as well as geographic. A regional perspective on the development of television markets brings to light national similarities, such as the widespread adoption of commercial television across the nations of Latin America in the 1950s, or to take a familiar example from the old metropolis, the wave of privatization and new services which has transformed television in Europe since the mid-1980s. For one thing, a regional, rather than a global, perspective elucidates the connections between trade and culture, particularly in the potential impact which the formation of regional free trade zones might have upon program exchange, and in the clash of free trade rhetoric with national cultural objectives.

So long as television remained a terrestrial technology, there was less distance between the local and the national levels on one hand, and the national and the global on the other. However, satellite distribution has opened up regional and transcontinental geolinguistic markets, while terrestrial broadcasting and video cassettes have provided an additional but less immediate means for the distribution of television products to diasporic communities, notably those of Chinese, Arab and Indian origin. Attention to this regionalization of markets gives greater insight upon what is happening in the world than does the hollow rhetoric of globalization. Two instances of trends elucidated by a regional perspective are the rise of the regional entrepreneurs, and the restratification of audiences into 'imagined communities' beyond national boundaries.

Although Rupert Murdoch severed his national ties with Australia by taking up US citizenship in 1986, it remains the case that his rise to become perhaps the world's most spectacular media entrepreneur was based upon his initial accumulation of media assets in Australia, where he still controls almost 70% of the daily press. From this base, literally on the periphery of the English-speaking world, he launched his ventures into the largest countries of that geolinguistic region, first Britain and then the US. Even more peripheral in origin were the two generations of Azcárragas, the Mexican dynasty whose dominance of the world's largest Spanish-speaking market in an erstwhile 'Third World' country has been turned into a platform for extensive operations in the US as well as South America, and a toehold

in Spain. In this respect, 'El tigre' (the tiger) Azcárraga is not 'Mexican' any more than Murdoch is Australian. If the term globalization is to mean anything, it must take account of such deracination of corporations and entrepreneurs from 'their' nation-states, and furthermore, the more recent moves of these entrepreneurs in particular even beyond their geolinguistic regions. With Murdoch's purchase of STAR TV and Azcárraga's return to partnership in the PanAmSat private international satellite corporation, we see both of them ratcheting up the scale of their operations so as to establish a strong presence in Asia, expected to be the fastest-growing regional media market of the next century. Also of note is the strategic alliance which they have made to exchange programming from each other's regions.

Benedict Anderson's concept of 'imagined communities' has been one of the most influential tropes in theories of national consciousness for more than a decade (1983), but as satellite television distribution transcends the borders of the nation-state, there is some value in applying it to the new audience entities which that process creates. Similarly, in the decades since Nordenstreng and Varis first drew attention to the transnational media's action upon 'the nonhomogeneity of the national state' (1973), there have arisen international services which stratify audiences across national boundaries not just by class and education, but by 'taste culture' and age - the ostensible international youth culture audience for MTV, for example. Of more interest to us are the imagined communities of speakers of the same language and participants in similar cultures which form the geolinguistic regions exploited by the media entrepreneurs, especially the diasporic communities of emigrées on distant continents.

Even amongst the globalization theorists, it is becoming a commonplace to observe that the globalizing forces towards 'homogenization', such as satellite television, exist in tension with contradictory tendencies towards 'heterogenization', conceived pessimistically as fragmentation, or with postmodernist optimism, as pluralism. Thus, "identity and cultural affiliation are no longer matters open to the neat simplifications of traditional nationalism. They are matters of ambiguity and complexity, of overlapping loyalties and symbols with multiple meanings" (Castles *et al.* 1990, p. 152).

To the extent that we can assume that television is in fact a source of identity, and that audiences for the same program derive similar identities from it, it becomes possible to think of identities which are multiple, although also often contradictory, corresponding to the different levels from which the television environment is composed in a given market. An Egyptian immigrant in Britain, for example, might think of herself as a Glaswegian when she watches her local Scottish channel, a British resident when she switches over to the BBC, an Islamic Arab expatriate in Europe when she tunes in to the satellite service from the Middle East, and a world citizen when she channel surfs on to CNN. In both the positivist mainstream and critical traditions of communication theory in the past, disregard for actual content, disdainful stereotypes of 'lowest common denominator'

programming, and dichotomous thinking about tradition and modernity, all have prevented this more pluralistic conception of audience identity to surface. What it has required has been, firstly, the more recent theorization of multiple social identities being overlaid in the individual subject, and then the perception argued for here, that these identities are related to the local, national, regional and global levels at which cultural products such as television programs circulate.

To conclude: while it is evident that the periphery has developed its own centres, we should not overestimate the degree to which the balance has shifted outwards, nor assume that this is a permanent tendency. Indeed, rather than use such spatial and centrifugal metaphors from physics, we should think more in terms from geology, seeing the global, regional, national and local levels as layers of the distribution of television programs and other such cultural goods, with the proviso that these layers are not sedimented, but overlap and penetrate each other.

The demise of 'cultural imperialism' as the paradigm for the theoretical understanding of international cultural exchange should not scare us into a search for another grand narrative with which to replace it. Rather, we can now make a shift to the 'middle range', where theoretical abstraction can be brought into proportion with empirical research and policy analysis, and the skies are not cloudy all day. Above all, that shift allows due attention to be given to the regional as an intermediary layer between the global and the local, a zone which has been too much occupied in the past by the national. This regional level can be understood both as contiguous international physical space, as in 'the Southeast Asian region', or in more cultural terms, such as the imagined community of Spanish-speakers, dispersed in more than a dozen nations on three continents, but united by satellite television.

At this middle range level, research can begin to explore the mechanisms of international exchange, such as the role of trade events, joint ventures and international co-production arrangements; and it can track the fortunes of programs within their regions, rather than just those from the dominant production centres outside - to look at the pre-eminence of Hindi programs over those in other Indian languages, for example. Finally, it can go beyond trade and ratings figures to undertake qualitative research on the responses and interpretations made by different audiences in a world where cultural identity is itself multi-layered, no longer, if it ever was, just a question of 'national culture'.

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