

Media imperialism

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Media imperialism is a subcategory under the broader heading of cultural imperialism. The conventional view for quite some time was that it was the Western (especially US) media, and the technologies associated with it, that was imperialistic and that dominated less developed nations and their cultures. Thus, it was television programs created in the United States, movies from Hollywood (Cowen 2002), books by American authors and published originally in the United States, US media conglomerates such as Fox and Time Warner, and so on, that were seen as imposing themselves on less developed nations and playing a key role not only in their media, but in shaping their culture. For example, the idea that American movies have dominated not only less developed nations, but much of the world as a whole, is supported in *Global Hollywood 2*: "Los Angeles–New York culture and commerce dominate screen entertainment around the globe, either directly or as an implied other, and the dramatic success of US film since World War I has been a model for its export of music, television, advertising, the Internet, and sport" (Miller et al. 2005).

While still a powerful view, other views have emerged on this issue that indicate that Western, especially American, media are not as powerful as had been thought (Sparks 2007). First, alternative global media giants have arisen to compete with those emanating from the West. One example is the Arabic Al-Jazeera which began operations in 1996 and is based in Qatar. It is a global source of news (Bielsa 2008) designed to compete with CNN and BBC. Another example is Bollywood, India's answer to Hollywood and the source of large numbers of movies that are distributed throughout much of the world (Tyrell 1999; Larkin 2003).

Then there are the local and regional media which have always been important and, in

many ways, their power has grown in recent years. Another factor is the expansion of the Internet as a source of highly diverse media of all sorts. Finally, the global distribution of, say, an American movie or television program does not mean that it is going to be viewed and understood everywhere in the same way that its creators intend, or interpreted in the same way as it is by an American audience. The idea that media products are interpreted differently by different audiences throughout the world is in line with the widely accepted contemporary view, most associated with postmodern social theorists, that media products are simply "texts" and what is of greatest importance is not what authors "intend," but rather the interpretations of the "readers" and "viewers." People are not passive recipients of the media, but actively construct their products. Thus, the emphasis on the power of the person/reader/viewer serves to undermine the whole idea of media imperialism.

Much has been written about this in the past in terms, for example, of the way in which non-American viewers interpreted popular TV programs such as *Dallas* (Ang 1985). However, we need to think about this more in terms of more recent TV offerings such as the once wildly popular *24* (although it was canceled in 2010). To most viewers in the United States this was seen as an inspiring vision of how the nation could respond, often quite ruthlessly, to new global threats that emerged after 9/11. Some American viewers were concerned about the negative images offered of their supposed adversaries, especially Muslims, but such a reaction was likely to be much more extreme among Muslim viewers in the United States, as well as in other parts of the world. Less extremely, many viewers in Europe were likely to see this program as a celebration of American individualism, aggressiveness, and its over-willingness to take dangerous and reckless actions that further endanger, rather

than improve, the chances of, world peace. The meaning of 24, like that of every other cultural product, is in the eyes of the beholder and the culture in which the beholder exists profoundly shapes that interpretation.

In 1977 Jeremy Tunstall (1977) wrote a book entitled *The Media Are American*. Over two decades later he published *The Media Were American: US Mass Media in Decline* (Tunstall 2008). The timing of the publications, and the nature of their titles, tell us much of what we need to know about the role of American mass media in an increasingly globalized world. Tunstall's basic point in the most recent book is that the global influence of the American media peaked in the mid twentieth century and has been in decline ever since. It is not American media, nor media from any other country, that dominates the world. Rather, national media have not only survived, but are increasingly important (they are dominant in countries which include the overwhelming majority of the world's population). The largest countries in the world are now either media self-sufficient, or have a rough balance of imports and indigenous media. That leaves a large number of countries (about 150), with a relatively small total population, that are largely dependent on media imports. Overall, outside the United States about 10 percent of world media time is devoted to US media, about 10 percent to other media imports (largely from the immediate region, continent, subcontinent, or language area), and about 80 percent to domestic and national media.

A variety of other findings point to the fact that no media dominate the world. While Euro-American media are the world leaders, people in fact spend more time with their national media than with any such imports. CNN is indeed global but it is largely watched by Americans abroad; few locals anywhere in the world watch CNN, at least on a regular basis. In Brazil (and elsewhere) it is telenovelas that are predominant and they are produced by a large Brazilian company, Globo. There are regional media pecking orders with, for example, Mexico the leader in Latin America.

China is a growing media power in East Asia, an area that includes Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Malaysia (Yang 1996).

In spite of the arguments against media imperialism, the fact is that we have witnessed the rise of the "new" global media (e.g., Apple's iTunes, Facebook, Twitter, Google, Microsoft) (McChesney 1999) with great power to impose their systems on large portions of the world. While the major players change over time, especially through mergers of various types, the global media (this applies to traditional media such as newspapers, TV, and movies, as well as to the newly emerging media on, or related to, the Internet) are increasingly dominated by a relatively small number of huge corporations. In virtually all sectors the goal is to produce a relatively noncompetitive global environment in order to maximize profits. This process is fairly well-advanced in the "old media" and it is ongoing in the case of the "new media." There, competition continues, but largely because the process is so new and the dust has yet to settle. Thus, for example, Facebook and MySpace succeeded in vanquishing a number of early competitors (e.g., Friendster) for the position of the dominant social networking sites, but they continue to compete with each other and with the possibility of new competitors arising in this relatively new arena. Furthermore, giants in the industry such as Newscorp, Microsoft, Google, and Yahoo are either seeking to create their own versions of successful new media, especially on the Internet, or they are seeking to either buy into, or gain control over, already successful websites (Microsoft purchased a small share of Facebook in late 2007 and it sought, unsuccessfully, to gain control of Yahoo) as well as those that show signs of being successful. In terms of the former, in late 2007 Google announced plans to better compete with Facebook by forming an alliance with various other companies to advance its own social network, Orkut, as well as others such as LinkedIn, hi5, Friendster, Plaxo, and Ning (Helft & Stone 2007). While control over the new Internet media is far from clear or resolved, it seems clear that in the long

run it, too, will become an increasingly less competitive world.

However, the movement in the direction of global media giants is countered, at least to some degree, by the rise of independent media ("Indymedia") as another source of media diversity that counters media imperialism. Indymedia has come to be associated with globalization, especially the alter-globalization movement. The first independent media center associated with the alter-globalization movement was created at the first big protest against globalization at the Seattle meetings of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in late 1999: "Indymedia journalists reported directly from the streets, while activists uploaded their own text, audio, video, and image files" (Juris 2005). Such centers soon sprang up throughout the United States and later throughout the world: at one time there were over 150 such sites in 60 countries worldwide. Indymedia has played a particularly important role during protests, actions, and gatherings through, for example, e-mails, formal updates, and the virtually immediate upload and dissemination of videos and images, including live video and audio streaming. Expertise on such matters is now widespread and Indymedia is not dependent on professionals in the media. It is highly reflexive, leading to a situation where those involved are often filming one another in the streets. Indymedia is also involved in disseminating information and technologies so that activists throughout the world can become involved.

Also worth mentioning here as a threat to the aspirations of the global media are "hacktivists"—those who hack into computer programs in order to further various causes, in this case the alter-globalization movement.

All of this can be seen as related to the movement toward open-sourcing (e.g., Linux) and Web 2.0. Those involved in Indymedia are not only involved in, and producing, the protests in their roles as media personnel, but they are consuming them as well. In the process, the authority and power structures of the traditional mass media are countered and made far less consequential.

NOTE

Derived from Ritzer, G. (2010) *Globalization: A Basic Text*. Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford.

SEE ALSO: Al-Jazeera; Bollywood; Cultural imperialism; Hacktivists; Hollywood; Internet; Media culture; Media society; Mediascapes.

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