

Mapping Global Media Flow and Contra-Flow

Daya Kishan Thussu

[...]

The global media landscape in the first decade of the twenty-first century represents a complex terrain of multi-vocal, multimedia and multi-directional flows. The proliferation of satellite and cable television, made possible by digital technology, and the growing use of online communication, partly as a result of the deregulation and privatisation of broadcasting and telecommunication networks, have enabled media companies to operate in increasingly transnational rather than national arenas, seeking and creating new consumers worldwide. With the exception of a few powers such as the United States, Britain and France, whose media (particularly broadcasting, both state-run and privately operated) already had an international dimension, most countries have followed a largely domestic media agenda within the borders of a nation-state.

Gradual commercialisation of media systems around the world has created new private networks that are primarily interested in markets and advertising revenues. Nationality scarcely matters in this market-oriented media ecology, as producers view the audience principally as consumers and not as citizens. This shift from a state-centric and national view of media to one defined by consumer interest and transnational markets has been a key factor in the expansion and acceleration of media flows: from North to South, from East to West, and from South to South, though their volume varies according to the size and value of the market.

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The US-led Western media, both online and offline, and in various forms – information, infotainment and entertainment – are global in their reach and influence. Given the political and economic power of the United States, its media are available across the globe, if not in English then in dubbed or indigenised versions. As its closest ally, Britain – itself a major presence in global media, particularly in the field of news and current affairs – benefits from the globalisation of Americana. The only non-Western genre with a global presence is Japanese animation (and this would not have been possible without the economic underpinnings of the world's second largest economic power). These represent what might be termed as 'dominant media flows'. Though some peripheral countries have emerged as exporters of television programmes and films, the USA continues to lead the field in the export of audio-visual products. From news and current affairs (CNN, Discovery) through youth programming (MTV), children's television (Disney), feature films (Hollywood), sport (ESPN) to the Internet (Google), the United States is the global behemoth. One result of the privatisation and proliferation of television outlets and the growing glocalisation of US media products is that American film and television exports witnessed nearly a five-fold increase between 1992 and 2004.

The convergence of television and broadband has opened up new opportunities for the flow of media content. As US-led Western media conglomerates have regionalised and localised their content to extend their reach beyond the elites in the world and to create the 'global popular', many Southern media organisations have benefited from synergies emerging from this glocalisation process. Some have skilfully used their position within a media conglomerate, drawing on technological and professional expertise to grow into global operators. In addition, the globalisation of Western or Western-inspired media has contributed to the creation of professional careers in media and cultural industries. The localisation of media content and the outsourcing of digital media for transnational corporations – from Hollywood post-production to animation and digital data management – have provided the impetus for the formation of important global hubs for creative industries: by 2006, for example, India had emerged as a key destination for out-sourcing media content.

A second layer of international media players may include both private as well as state-sponsored flows. The Indian film industry (popularly referred to as Bollywood) and the Latin American telenovelas are the two major examples of transnational global flows that operate in a commercial environment. The South Africa-based, pan-African network M-Net is another example of such transnational and regional communications. Among the state-supported flows we can include Euronews, the 24/7 multilingual news consortium of Europe's public service broadcasters, TV5 and Radio France Internationale, aiming at the francophone market. Other transnational actors may include the Arab news network Al-Jazeera, the pan-Latin American TV channel Televisora del Sur ('Television of the South', Telesur) based in Venezuela, and the round-the-clock English-language global television channel, Russia Today (RTTV), intended to provide news 'from a Russian perspective', launched in 2005. The expansion of CCTV-9, the English language network of China Central Television, reflects the recognition by the Beijing authorities of the importance of the English language as the key to success for global commerce and communication and their strategy to reach a global audience. These originators of

transnational media flows have a strong regional presence but are also aimed at audiences outside their primary constituency. These can be categorised as representing 'subaltern flows'. As one recent study of Al-Jazeera concluded: 'The information age is upon us and in the decades ahead we can expect only more Al-Jazeeras, adding to an ever greater torrent of information, as regional ideas spread around the world and become global.' [...]

In the era of globalisation, the one-way vertical flow has given way to multiple and horizontal flows, as subaltern media content providers have emerged to service an ever growing geo-cultural market. However, as trade figures demonstrate, the circulation of US media products continues to define the 'global'. But how these products are consumed in a cross-cultural context poses a contested range of responses, made more difficult due to the paucity of well-grounded empirical studies. Some have argued that the global-national-local interaction is producing 'heterogeneous disjunctures' rather than a globally homogenised culture. Others have championed the cause of cultural hybridity, a fusion formed out of adaptation of Western media genres to suit local languages, styles and conventions.

On the other hand, critical theorists have argued that the transnational corporations, with the support of their respective governments, exert indirect control over the developing countries, dominating markets, resources, production and labour. In the process they undermine the cultural autonomy of the countries of the South and create a dependency on both the hardware and software of communication and media: 'transnational corporate cultural domination' is how one prominent scholar defined the phenomenon. Galtung also argued that information flows maintain and reinforce a dependency syndrome: the interests, values and attitudes of the dominant elite in the 'peripheries' of the South coincide with those of the elite in the 'core' – the North. The core-periphery relations create institutional links that serve the interests of the dominant groups, both in the centre and within the periphery. In this analysis of global flows, the audience and media content was largely ignored: that the content can be interpreted differently by different audiences and that the so-called periphery may be able to innovate and improvise on the core was discounted. Theoretical debates have largely been confined to how the rest of the world relates to, adopts, adapts or appropriates Western media genres. There is relatively little work being done on how the 'subaltern flows' create new transnational configurations and how they connect with gradually localising global 'dominant flows'.

Localisation of Global Americana

Glocalisation is central to the acceleration of Western or Westernised media flows across the globe. What seems to be emerging is a glocal media product, conforming to what Sony once characterised as 'global localisation': media content and services being tailored to specific cultural consumers, not so much because of any particular regard for national cultures but as a commercial imperative. Glocalisation strategies exemplify how the global can encompass both the transnational and geo-cultural by co-opting the local in order to maintain the dominant flow. This localisation trend is

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'Subaltern' Contra-Flows: Anti-Hegemonic or Pro-Americana?

In parallel with the globalisation of Americana – whether in its original or hybridised version – new transnational networks have emerged, contributing to what one commentator has called 'Easternisation and South-South flows'. There is evidence that global media traffic is not just one way – from the West (with the USA at its core) to the rest of the world, even though it is disproportionately weighted in favour of the former. These new networks, emanating from such Southern urban creative hubs as Cairo, Hong Kong and Mumbai, and trading in cultural goods represent what could be called 'subaltern flows'. Over the last ten years the media world has witnessed a proliferation of multilingual growth of content emanating from these regional creative centres. The availability of digital technology, privatised and deregulated broadcasting and satellite networks has enabled the increasing flow of content from the global South to the North, for example, the growing international visibility of telenovelas or Korean and Indian films, as well as regional broadcasting, such as the pan-Arabic Middle East Broadcasting Centre (MBC), the pioneering 24/7 news network Al-Jazeera, or the Mandarin language Phoenix channel, which caters to a Chinese diaspora.

Non-Western countries such as China, Japan, South Korea, Brazil and India have become increasingly important in the circulation of cultural products. Japanese animation, film, publishing and music business was worth \$140 billion in 2003, with animation, including *manga* (comics), *anime* (animation), films, videos and merchandising products bringing in \$26 billion, according to the Digital Content Association of Japan. South Korea has emerged as a major exporter of entertainment – film, television soap operas, popular music and online games – with television dramas such as *Jewel in the Palace* being extremely popular in China, prompting commentators to speak of a Korean wave (the '*Hallyu*') sweeping across east and southeast Asia. [...]

Transnational Telenovelas

Another key example of transnational 'subaltern flow' is the Latin American soap opera, the telenovela, which is increasingly becoming global in its reach. The transnationalisation of telenovelas has been made possible through Televisa in Mexico, Venevisión in Venezuela, and Globo TV in Brazil – the leading producers of the genre. The Brazilian media giant TV Globo (exporting 26,000 hours of programmes annually to 130 countries) and Mexico's Televisa (the world's largest producer of Spanish-language programming, which in 2004 earned \$175 million from

programming exports, largely from telenovelas), are also the two primary exporters of this popular genre of television across the globe.

By 2005 the telenovela had developed into a \$2 billion industry, of which \$1.6 billion was earned within the region and \$341 million outside, being broadcast in 50 languages and dialects and reaching 100 countries from Latin America to southern and eastern Europe, to Asia, Africa and the Arab world. Apart from being a commercial success, telenovelas can also help in the construction of a transnational 'hispanic' identity, as the Venezuelan scholar Daniel Mato has suggested. The appeal of the genre lies in the melodramatic and often simplistic narrative which can be understood and enjoyed by audiences in a wide variety of cultural contexts. Bielby and Harrington have argued that this reverse flow has influenced soap operas back in the US, leading to 'genre transformation' especially in day-time soaps.

The success of telenovelas outside the 'geo-linguistic market' of Spanish and Portuguese consumers, shows the complexity of media consumption patterns. Such telenovelas as *The Rich Also Cry* were very successful in Russia in the 1990s, while Sony developed its first telenovela in 2003 – *Poor Anastasia* for the Russian network, CTC. The genre has become popular even in Western Europe: a German company has produced their own telenovela, *Bianca: Road to Happiness*, shown in 2004 on the public channel ZDF. In India, Sony has successfully adapted the popular Colombian telenovela *Betty la Fea* into Hindi as *Jassi Jaissi Koi Nahin*, which became one of the most popular programmes on Indian television. The transnationalisation of telenovelas is an indication of contra-flow in television content. As one commentator has noted:

In all, about two billion people around the world watch *telenovelas*. For better or worse, these programmes have attained a prominent place in the global marketplace of culture, and their success illuminates one of the back channels of globalization. For those who despair that Hollywood or the American television industry dominates and defines globalization, the *telenovela* phenomenon suggests that there is still room for the unexpected.

[...]

Hybridity as Hegemony

These prominent examples of 'subaltern' and 'geo-cultural' media flows may give a false impression that the world communication has become more diverse and democratic. A careful analysis of the reality of global media flows and contra-flows demonstrates a more complex process, however. The imbalance between the 'dominant' and the 'subaltern' and 'geo-cultural' global media flows reflects the 'asymmetries in flows of ideas and goods'. Despite the growing trend towards contra-flow as analysed in this book, the revenues of non-Western media organisations, with the exception of Japanese animation, are relatively small and their global impact is restricted to geo-cultural markets or at best to small pockets of regional transnational consumers. None of the Latin telenovelas has had the international impact comparable

with US soaps such as *Dallas* or the cult following of *Friends* or *Sex and the City*, and despite the growing presence of Indian films outside India, its share in the global film industry valued in 2004 at \$200 billion was still less than 0.2 per cent.

At the same time, 'dominant flows' are becoming stronger. It is no coincidence that the world's biggest television network MTV (reaching 418 million households in 2005) is American, as are CNN International (260 million households worldwide) and Discovery Channel (180 million households worldwide). In 2004, out of the world's top five entertainment corporations, according to *Fortune* magazine, four were US-based: Time Warner (2004 revenue: \$42.8 billion); Walt Disney (2004 revenue: \$30.7 billion); Viacom (2004 revenue: \$27.05 billion); and News Corporation (2004 revenue: \$20.8 billion). Wal-Mart was for the fourth year running the world's largest corporation, with a revenue in 2004 of nearly \$288 billion and profit of \$10.2 billion. Not surprisingly, US-based companies – 181 in total – dominated the list (*Fortune*, 2005). Voice of America claims to have 100 million weekly listeners for its 44 languages; AP reaches 8,500 international subscribers in 121 countries, while APTN is a major television news agency. The world's top three largest business newspapers and magazines are American: *The Wall Street Journal* (2005 global circulation 2.3 million), *Business Week* (1.4 million) and *Fortune* (1.1 million). The world's top three magazines too are American: *Reader's Digest* (2005 global circulation, 23 million), *Cosmopolitan* (9.5 million) and *National Geographic* (8.6 million); as are the two major international news magazines: *Time* (2005 global circulation: 5.2 million) and *Newsweek* (4.2 million). The world's top three advertising agencies in 2005 were all based in the US: Young & Rubican (gross worldwide income \$9.25 billion), The Ogilvy Group (\$6.48 billion) and J. W. Thompson (\$5.05 billion).

The question of how contra is contra and against whom also acquires salience. With its slogan 'News from the South', the pan-Latin American 'anti-hegemonic' news network Telesur promises to be an alternative to CNN. 'It's a question of focus, of where we look at our continent from', Jorge Botero, Telesur's news director told the BBC. 'They look at it from the United States. So they give a rose-tinted, flavour-free version of Latin America. We want to look at it from right here.' It has been dubbed as *al-Bolivar* – a combination of Al-Jazeera and the Latin American hero. The French government has announced a 24-hour international TV news network, the French International News Channel (CFII) that aims to be the French-language CNN – 'CNN à la Française'. 'France must ... be on the front line in the global battle of TV pictures' was how President Jacques Chirac justified the network, a joint venture between state-owned broadcaster France Télévisions and commercial television company TF1. These examples, however, are exceptions rather than the rule – both are state-sponsored flows and their impact on global communication is yet to be felt.

In ideological terms, commercial contra-flows champion free-market capitalism, supporting a privatised and commodified media system. One should therefore avoid the temptation to valorise them as counter-hegemonic to the dominant Americana. Subaltern flows are unlikely to have a significant impact on the American hegemony of global media cultures, which, arguably, has strengthened not weakened given the localisation of media content, despite the supposed decentring of global media. This can also bode ill for local cultural sovereignty, as one UN report noted: 'the unequal

economic and political powers of countries, industries and corporations cause some cultures to spread, others to wither.' Moreover, as Americana expands and deepens its hegemony, a hybridised and localised media product can provide the more acceptable face of globalisation and therefore effectively legitimise the ideological imperatives of a free-market capitalism. [...]