Beyond Cultural Imperialism: Media Interventions in the Twenty-First Century

The world is a messy place and media’s place within it is hardly uniform—there is no “magic bullet.” Cultural pluralism, feminist theory, cultural hybridity, poststructuralism, postcolonialism, postmodernization, and so on—the list of theoretical paradigms through which scholars today examine media processes and interventions is long. International communication research is currently undergoing a period of fragmentation. It is not yet clear which theoretical framework will obtain dominant status in the field—or if any school of thought will again reach this tipping point—as development and modernization theory did in the 1950s and 1960s, or cultural imperialism in the 1970s. This fragmented theoretical landscape suggests the need for retrospection on the methods of intervention used by Western states and multilateral organizations to affect media systems in closed and transitional states. Only through strengthening media projects which are directly linked to, and controlled by, local communities will media development as a field advance towards the goal of “improv[ing] the capacity of private, community, public and/or state media and to promote media independence and pluralism” (Arsenault & Powers, 2010, p. 6). In addition, the term “intervention” itself must be unpacked. Media development programs ought to focus their support on locally conceived and run media projects. For example, community radio stations around the world or open source web development projects such as Ushahidi in Kenya which got its start crowd sourcing reports of election-related violence in 2008. Such efforts operate at the “local-global nexus” of communication technologies and culturally-situated audience reception.¹

¹ This is a term used by Kraidy and Murphy (2003) to describe global interactions and began to contextualize cultural hybridities.
Foundational international communication literature, developed in the 1950s and 1960s, advanced the notion that media are powerful tools for development following a Western model, by simultaneously bolstering the nation-state and driving modernization in newly de-colonialized countries. Lerner (1958) and Schramm (1964) produced seminal works hypothesizing that values labeled as “traditional” from a Western perspective were hindering the modernization of developing nations and that media could play a direct role in development. Media was seen as the “solution” to the “problem” of traditional societies that were limiting the ability of the West to fully exploit potential economic markets throughout the world (Sreberny-Mohammadi, 2002). Lerner and Schramm both viewed media as a catalyst to transform societies through remaking attitudes and beliefs in the image of the West. This school of thought built on early 19th century “magic bullet” ideas of powerful, direct media effects (Lasswell, 1926, as cited in McMillin, 2007, p. 28) and situated comparative analyses of communication processes internationally from an elitist, purely prescriptive mindset. Development theory began to be largely discredited starting in the 1970s as a geo-politically based, anti-communist drive to reshape developing nations in the mode of the West and make their populations into good consumers of Western commercial products.

In reaction to this model of Western-directed modernization and development, Latin American scholars developed key dependency theories in the 1960s and 1970s. Scholars posited that imbalances in the flow of information (in addition to all types of goods and services) between core nations, such as the United States, and developing countries lead to cultural dependency and the hegemony of the United States (McMillin, 2007; Sreberny-Mohammadi, 2002). In the 1970s, building on dependency theory, scholars advanced theories of “cultural imperialism,” or “media imperialism.” They theorized that reliance on Western countries for
media content and technology transfers would lead to media systems in the developing world modeled after the commercial broadcasting model prevalent in the United States and other ex-colonial nations (Sreberny-Mohammadi, 2002; Tomlinson, 2003). According to Schiller (1979), within this structure, local populations are again relegated to the role of consumers of Western cultural products rather than active agents in shaping their own development (as cited in Tomlinson, 2003, p. 116).

While cultural imperialism adherents made important advances in critiquing modernization, they failed to move the analysis of international media interventions beyond theorizing about the macro-level impacts of Western-based power structures and the resulting imbalance of news-flow between developed nations and the rest of the world. The populations of nations on the “periphery” continued to be relegated to the margins of inquiry, if considered at all. Kraidy and Murphy (2003) highlight this shortcoming in terms of researchers, who “stopped short of engaging the ‘feudal’ inequities and cultural practices that media users faced in their everyday lives” (p. 301). This statement summarizes the limitations of cultural imperialism theory in that it is macro in scale and frames media effects through a monolithic, Western-centric analysis. Inequities exist, but so do resistance and individual agency in reception. For example, the New World Information Order debates of the 1960s and 1970s attempted to bring the voices of developing nations into international communication processes by claiming agency for self-representations. These efforts, originating in the Non-Aligned Movement did gain the attention of (mostly non-Western) scholars (McMillin, 2003). However, such efforts largely failed due to a predictable lack of support from Western nations. Breaking from this legacy, governments in the West must today support indigenous efforts aimed at media reform.
With the intensification of globalization and the continuing integration of global media systems in the 1980s, cultural imperialism theories provided, in spite of the limitations addressed above, an interesting point of entry into the analysis of media development and media for development interventions. In this vein, by the 1990s, researchers began to realize that a gap existed between the ideas set forth in this school of thought and empirically grounded knowledge of real-world media processes and reception (Tomlinson, 2003). As a result, scholars looking to contextual media production and reception as a more complex process of “mediation” within specific cultural settings turned to media ethnography to fill this void while accounting for broader global interactions. This shift in the scholarly framework moved inquiry beyond assumptions of if a phenomenon, such as “capitalism is culture,” existed to questions of how individuals experience everyday life within it (Tomlinson, 2003, p. 118).

In a seminal study entitled *The Export of Meaning: Cross-cultural Meaning of Dallas*, Liebes and Katz (1990) called the simplicity of cultural imperialism into question. They posit that in order to confirm ideas of imperialism in the internationally popular U.S. television program *Dallas*, that three dimensions would have to be present: “(1) that there is a message incorporated in the program that is designed to profit American interests overseas, (2) that the message is decoded by the receiver in the way it was encoded by the sender, and (3) that it is accepted uncritically by the viewers and allowed to seep into their culture” (p. 4). Researchers and practitioners alike must remember that processes of audience reception and mediation of mass media messages are highly nuanced and need to account for the fluidity of the global and the local in the everyday lives of populations within specific cultural contexts. We must acknowledge the complex global interactions of media production and use through the prism of how individuals experience life within the global media culture.
Today there is no overarching paradigm in international media development research and practice. Within this fractured theoretical context, a focus on the “local-global nexus” of media production and consumption necessitates that scholars and practitioners make continual efforts to move beyond Western-centric analyses and bridge the gap between media intervention methods and locally rooted media use practices. We must not forget or gloss over the more fundamental issues of what right do (generally) Western scholars and practitioners in the field have to judge and direct the experiences of “others,” as well as the neo-colonial roots of media development practice and research that persist in present-day interactions. The needs and desires of local populations must be taken into account in the planning and implementation of media development programs. To do anything less would be to fall back into historical patterns of media assistance that advanced the interests of more powerful nation-states over the interests of the vulnerable populations such programs are intended to serve.

In turn multilateral media and development assistance organizations should focus their efforts on providing financial and technical support to locally controlled media projects such as community radio stations. Such media outlets are on the forefront of advancing the internationally recognized Right to Communication, or the right to “receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers” (Center for Human Rights Education, n.d.). As two-way platforms for information exchange, these outlets work to broaden the public sphere by opening spaces for dialogue and debate—functions that are particularly critical in states transitioning to democracy (see Ayala Ramírez, 1997). Situated in close contact with the communities they serve, community media remain one of the few media types with the potential for the majority of the world’s population to access information and entertainment in a cost effective and culturally relevant manner.
References


