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The International Flow Of Media Material: Trends And Prospects For Developing Asia

By

Nora C Quebral
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The International Flow of Media Material:
Trends and Prospects for Developing Asia

by

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Poring through a cross-section of the literature on international information flows leaves one with the surfeited impression that everything that can be said about them has been said. It has been about three decades, after all, since the subject became critical enough to demand world attention. In that time politicians, professional communicators, academics - never known for their reticence - have all taken a crack at the subject. Tons of words later, all that appears needed to point us to some research directions is to collate, categorize and analyze the collective wisdom from a chiefly Asian perspective. In point of fact, this too has already been done in a sense by Chin-Chuan Lee, whose excellently researched and written Media Imperialism Reconsidered no one-shot seminar paper can hope to top and whose Chinese name qualifies him to an Asian point of view.

Since it would not do to simply hand out copies of Lee's book to the participants of this seminar and since his and my frame of work reference are not truly identical, I shall go ahead and attempt my own but
considerably truncated summary, categorization and - whenever possible - analysis of international media flows as a major concern in communication for development, using his book as one but not the sole reference. Per AMIC instructions, I shall limit myself to the global movement of media material, situating it in the larger context of transborder data flows when warranted.

**Media And Media Material**

For our purpose we shall assume media material (a.k.a. content, programs, films, music, news, etc.) to be that originating from one country and transmitted through mechanical or electronic media of communication to listeners, viewers, readers and users in other countries. The media that we are particularly interested in are newspapers, books, magazines, television, radio, motion pictures, audio and video tape cassettes, and records. A purist could argue that the first three are media materials too, being the end products of printing machines, while the rest are machines themselves or mechanical devices. But since common usage has labeled the three print products as media, they shall be so identified here for present convenience.
The reason for my taking time to tick off each communication medium through which material might be transferred from one country to another is that the term "media" seems to have become too loose for comfort. For one thing, media are not just mass or personal anymore, having been augmented by others dubbed as group or local media. Developing Asia knows them well: leaflets, wall newspapers, posters, slides, puppet shows and theater, to name some. On the other side of the globe, in the meantime, computers and satellites, mainly, but other new technologies as well, have not only swelled the number of mass, group and individualized media but have also erased their old physical boundaries, thus adding their bit to over-the-border incursions. We are now seeing electronic publishing, electronic mail, computerized broadcast stories transferred across national borders by satellite, direct broadcast satellites, narrowcasting, cinema and television in partnership, and many other developments too technical for many of us to comprehend.

And now the discussion on international information flows expands our vocabulary with "transnational media", under which are placed "film companies, publishing firms, TV-producing businesses, and many other image-producing activities." If accepted into
the media fold, they represent another level in a media hierarchy that seems to be shaping up. One service to the communication field that some communication researcher might do right off is construct an up-to-date taxonomy of media that will sharpen terminologies and thereby contribute to conceptual clarity. As several scholars have observed, the field could do just now with fresh ideas coming from innovative minds.

The Problem with Flows

Minus the rhetoric and ideologial biases, the undisputable fact at the core of the problem on international flows is the imbalance of information exchange between and among countries because of the unequal distribution of communication resources and power in the world. Much more news, entertainment and educational matter get to the Third World from the developed countries - chiefly the United States - raising questions about effects on beliefs, self-image, values and tastes in the receiving countries. Yet much

1 Although according to Robert J. Samuelson of Newsweek (July 30, 1990) the Third World is gone, having become a casualty of the "implosion of the communist bloc," we shall continue to use the term here for want of a more convenient label.
less economic, scientific and technological information from developed countries that the Third World feels it needs gets into its pipelines.

Communication Resources

The data on the disparity of world communication facilities cannot be gainsaid. Table 1, adapted from the MacBride Report, shows that the difference between countries with low and middle GNP is large in number of television sets and telephones but small in number of newspapers and radio sets. The really enormous difference across all resources is between the two groups combined and the developed countries. The Report observes that the gap widens every year for two reasons: because of the larger capacity of rich countries to re-invest and because of differences in population growth.

The Report also points out that the higher the level of technology, the greater the disparity, as the chart on computer installation in the world shows. The United States alone takes care of 45.4 percent of the total of 87.1 percent. The other major industrial countries account for 41.7 percent. While the developed countries invested $54,40 in telecommunications infrastructure and equipment in 1977, the figure for the developing countries was $6,70.
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<td>B. With middle GNP ($400-$2,500)</td>
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1 China not included.
2 All of Western Europe except Portugal; USSR, German Democratic Republic, Czechoslovakia, Poland; USA, Canada, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, Israel.

INSTALLATION OF COMPUTERS IN THE WORLD

Note: IDC Survey as of the end of 1976 (total amount: $82.189 billion)


1/ Taken from the MacBride Report.
Media Content

Machine and equipment counts are not too difficult to do. More problematic is assessing the amounts, not to mention the effects, of material that goes through the media. Still, enough data have been collected on the flow of media materials to allow some limited observations.

The controversy on North-dominated information flows first broke in the area of international news. Receiving the brunt of criticism were the international news agencies which supply national newspapers and broadcast organizations around the world with much, if not all, of their foreign news. By reason of their being headquartered in developed countries (two out of the five are in the United States), their selection of the news to transmit was claimed to favor the center nations. Countries in the peripheries ended up without a forum for their views and a means of information exchange with one another.

Since that first salvo, news agencies have largely deflected the attack against them partly by refuting it and partly by honestly trying to correct it. The issue of news from developed regions getting more coverage in the world press remains, however.
Several news flow studies have tended to substantiate the claim. Illustrative is a comprehensive analysis, done in the Pacific Basin by Richstad and Nnaemeka in 1978, which found a clear dominance of news from North America and Western Europe among the 27 newspapers studied. The two regions got about 46 percent of all foreign news stories in the United States press, 73 percent from the Canadian press, and an average of 40 percent from the South Asian press. The Australian press gave half of its entire foreign news to the two regions. Conversely, events in Asia, Africa and South America totaled less than 5 percent of the entire foreign news coverage in most of the Pacific Basin press.

Be that as it may, Richstad and Nnaemeka, as do other researchers before and after them, caution against simplistic generalizations about a phenomenon that is much more complex than it appears. A study often cited to belie the claim that news agencies do not provide enough Third World news is that done by Schramm in 1977. He found that about half of the news content of four international wires operating in Asia dealt with the Third World, about 60 percent of that with Asia. Much less got into the Asian newspapers because the editors were apparently exercising their gatekeeping prerogative.
The same finger of caution is raised by various scholars about over-simplifying the other aspects of international flows. The warning becomes more cogent when discussions enter the realm of quality and effects of mediated over-the-border materials. Apart from being sparse, Third World news that does get into the world press is often characterized as negative, superficial and sensational. As for other types of foreign content, a few choice epithets for them out of the many are manipulator, homogenizer of culture, subverter of values, and apostle of consumerism.

Media Imperialism

Several names have been given to the phenomenon we are looking at. Boyd-Barrett says "media imperialism" and defines it as

"the process whereby the ownership, structure, distribution or content of the media in any one country are singly or together subject to substantial pressure from the media interests of any other country or countries without proportionate reciprocation of influence by the country so affected."

Especially in relation to broadcasting, Lee breaks down the concept further into four: (1) export of television programs to foreign countries; (2) foreign ownership and control of media outlets; (3) transfer of developed country broadcasting norms and institutional-
lization of media commercialism at the expense of public interest; and (4) imposition of capitalistic world views and infringement on the indigenous way of life of recipient nations.

McPhail uses the phrase "electronic colonialism," which for him is

"the dependency relationship established by the importation of communication hardware, foreign-produced software, along with engineers, technicians, and related information protocols, that vicariously establish a set of foreign norms, values and expectations which, in varying degrees, may alter the domestic cultures and socialization processes."

Radical critics of one-way flows prefer the term "cultural imperialism" to denote the holistic effect on dependent countries of foreign domination of their mass communication systems. For Schiller, cultural imperialism is

"the sum of the processes by which a society is brought into the modern world system and how its dominating stratum is attracted, pressured, forced, and sometimes bribed into shaping social institutions to correspond to, or even promote, the values and structures of the dominating center of the system."

The media fare that has probably come under heaviest attack is entertainment television, again, specifically, American television. In 1975, Kaviya computed the average proportion of imported versus local entertainment films in the four television
channels in Bangkok to be 3 to 1. More than 62 percent of the programs were from the United States. Of the films shown in Bangkok theaters, 78 percent were foreign, 46 percent of which were from the West. In Jakarta in 1972, Alfian reported that imported programs took 34 percent of the total television time, or about 74 percent of the total showing time allocated to the entertainment category. In 1974 the ten most popular television shows were all entertainment shows, and seven were imported from the United States. The three most popular were "Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea," "The Saint," and "I Dream of Jeannie."

In his 1980 study, Lee states that the United States sells to other countries about 3.3 times as many programs as the combined sales of the next three largest exporters – United Kingdom, France and West Germany. Based on admittedly limited data, he estimated that of 57 countries considered developing, a modal twelve imported 50 percent of their TV programs. Among them were Hong Kong, Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand. Singapore imported 60 percent. India and Taiwan, a pleasant surprise, were more self-reliant with purchases of only 20 percent each, again indicating a complex of factors at work. Pakistan and Indonesia each bought 30 percent.
Another study, a sequel to one sponsored by Unesco in 1973, found no major changes in the international flow of television programs and news ten years after. Varis found that the average volume of imported programs globally was still about one-third or more of total program time. His 1983 study showed that most of the imports came from the United States and, to a far lesser extent, from Western Europe and Japan. Most of them were of the recreational type like cinema and feature films, plays, serials, music and sports.

In the Asia-Pacific, the same study showed that television remained largely urban especially in India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippines and Thailand. Children's programs, which were third place in total transmission time, had the highest volume of imported programs: 53 percent during total transmission time and 55 percent during prime time. Entertainment programs took up half of the transmission hours: 51 percent during total transmission time and 56 percent during prime time. The imports averaged 49 percent during total transmission time and 56 percent during prime time.

One observation put forward by some writers to mitigate the media imperialism charge is that the United States derives two-thirds of its foreign earnings from other industrialized countries so that
only a third actually comes from the Third World. Lee thinks the statement misses the mark because the foreign exchange spent by poor countries for foreign TV programs cannot be called insignificant, relatively speaking. Besides, the more persistent complaint against “alien media products” is their threat to the cultural integrity of invaded nations.

Perceived Reasons for Imbalanced Flows

Solutions to the problem of the heavy flow of, and dissatisfaction with, imported media materials will reflect the perceived reasons for the problem’s being there in the first place. As in any other wide-ranging discussion, opinions on the matter tend to cluster around two end points and a middle. Considering the political color that has infused the debate, it would really be rather appropriate in this case to mark off left, right and centrist positions. We shall resist the temptation, however, and settle for calling them Groups I, II and III.

Group I Reasons

Group I maintains an approach alternately identified as Marxist, neo-Marxist, radical or dependency-theory-oriented. It sees unbalanced flows
in developing countries as a manifestation and reflection of the economic class struggle projected to the world level. As Schiller explains it, the cultural-communication sector of a society develops according to the world capitalist system of which it is a part. Its outputs are mainly determined by the same market forces that move the overall system's production of goods and services. A largely one-way flow of information from the core to the periphery of the system "represents the reality of power."

The basic organizational unit of the capitalist economy is the multinational corporation (MNC), Schiller continues. MNCs will try to influence and, if possible, dominate the cultural-communication sector in order to achieve their goal of accessing world markets and maximizing profits. This cultural penetration extends to all the institutions of an affected country - its language, education, research, and work organizations, perspectives and outlooks. The processes by which all this is accomplished is what Schiller means by cultural imperialism.

Besides the conventional "public" media, Schiller considers government information services, tourism, and the export of technology and technological systems as message transmission channels of MNCs. Assisting the MNCs' sales operations are three "vital informational
service activities": international advertising agencies, market survey and opinion polling services, and public relations firms. The newest addition to transnational media facilities is computer technology, which threatens to deepen the condition of dependency.

The penetrating country captures another country's broadcast media through commercialization. This it does not have to do with the press which has been commercial from the start. Once commercialized, the media carry the "cultural material" produced in core areas of the capitalistic world system like the United States, Great Britain and the Federal Republic of Germany. The material is imitated in the periphery countries when the national media industries demand a share of the market. Whether original or copied, the media material bears the ideological imprint of the centers of the capitalist world economy.

Group II Reasons

If the rallying cry of Group I is "national sovereignty," that of Group II is "free flow of information." Freedom, in this sense, is freedom from government restraint, whether in one's own country or another, whether in the collection or dissemination of information. Information is essentially a commodity bought and sold in the marketplace.
The normal idea of flow is one-way, Merrill says. And information simply does not flow evenly, so who can really talk of a "balance in news flows" in the real world? "One might as well ask why so much more news flows from New Delhi to Poona in India as flows from Poona to New Delhi." Furthermore, news is always piecemeal and biased in some way, Merrill declares, since it is subject to journalistic judgment. That is an attribute of news itself, not of Western news reporting.

Indicting Western agency news as being non-essential and negative Merrill considers valid, but he points out that the same characteristics describe a good deal of news flowing within developed countries. The "atypical, unusual, and often sensational..." are basic to the West's definition of news, and so it is natural for Western journalists to apply the same criteria to news from Third World countries.

While it is true that Western communication agencies supply most of the news around the world, Merrill would not call that imperialism. "One might just as well call the Mid-East Arabs 'imperialistic' because they supply the bulk of oil to the world." Third World media managers buy the information supplied by the West because they want and need it - or think
they do. They are not being forced to. If they think it threatens their culture, then they should shut it off by all means.

Merrill rightly invokes the political philosophy of liberalism, of which he is a dyed-in-the-wool exponent, as the basis for Western communication systems. He believes that within that philosophy, most U.S. media executives try to responsibly provide a wide range of information services, with profit and public service as motives. "They are not shy in their merchandising efforts," and some may not be as ethical or idealistic as others, he admits. The bottomline is that each country deals with information processes and products according to its politics and national characteristics, and there is really no way, he concludes, that divergent ethical and ideological pathways can converge. "About all we can expect is that the basic ideological systems of the world will continue progressing each in its own way,... defining its own terms to suit its ideology, and rhetorically slugging it out with those of differing views." Spoken like a true liberal, indeed.
Group III Reasons

Having used one writer each to represent the views of the two previous groups, we shall, in like manner, let Lee summarize the main arguments of Group III, keeping in mind that this particular center is not a fixed point but shades off to the left and to the right. While this middle group may not be neo-Marxist, those in it are guided by some of the insights from dependency theory.

Group III accepts both internal and external causes of media dependency. According to Lee, some of the internal variables are media infrastructure, socio-political systems, cultural traditions and economic structure. They are as strong influences towards media dependency as an external world capitalist system. In varying degrees, the members of Group III attribute the inequality of information flows to the condition of supply and "forced pseudo-demand." Certainly it is not due to an intentional conspiracy.

Countries like the United States have superior media resources that give them the edge in programming, production and distribution and, therefore, awards them media leadership. Furthermore, because of the economies of scale, the U.S. communication MNCs can make additional copies of a media material which, for a
small fraction of the original cost, can be sold profitably to the foreign market.

In broadcasting, the pseudo-demand stems from television's uncritical adoption of many of the radio norms which, together with the equipment, were also exported to other countries. As Lee cites from Katz, these are (1) nonstop broadcasting, (2) the drive for the biggest audience possible, and (3) up-to-the-minute news. These norms create a voracious demand for materials to fill up airtime. Since small countries do not have the resources to fill the void, they turn to imports.

Lee refers to Tunstall's view that sharp competition among the many commercial TV channels in Latin America, Canada and Australia led to the demand that siphoned in cheap U.S. telefilms. This could partly explain why countries like Canada and Australia, although developed, are just as avid consumers of U.S. telefilms.

International flows may affect a country's culture both positively and negatively, Group III believes. They do closely—although not perfectly—correspond to the patterns of the world power structure, but this is due more to the relative politico-economic strength of countries than to economic determinism and class conflict. There are inequitable information flows too.
between capitalist and socialist countries, among highly industrialized countries, and among socialist countries. Lee poses the possibility as well of socialist media imperialism, which does not seem to offer a viable alternative either.

Suggested Answers

Group I Answers

In his writings during the mid-70s, Schiller pins his hopes for large-scale change on the making of national communications policy which, in his words, is "a generic term for the struggle against cultural and social domination in all its forms, old and new, exercised from within or outside the nation." The first step to its making is developing people's critical consciousness of present realities. The second is presenting alternative communication forms with new formats, content and perspectives, no matter if they seem primitive and outmoded compared to American products. It may not be possible nor practial to totally exclude foreign media materials. What counts is a heightened awareness, the capacity to make informed selections, and widespread participation in the alternative mass communication.
From Hamelink, who restates and elaborates Schiller's position, we learn of Dieter Senghaas' proposal for "dissociation" from the present world economy as the only way Third World countries might develop. Hamelink adapts the concept for cultural autonomy and terms it "cultural dissociation." He describes it as a process by which a country disengages or delinks itself from international relations that hinder its autonomous development. This means not imitating foreign cultural systems and designing one appropriate to a country's environment. Echoing Schiller, he calls for a national information policy as a requirement for cultural dissociation since information flows and technology profoundly influence cultural development. Like Schiller, he stops short of specific prescription, preferring to chronicle instead the initiatives of individual countries to assert or protect their national cultures.

Today, with the virtual overturn of the socialist system and the disappearance of the new international information order from the Unesco agenda, Schiller is even more pessimistic about achieving "liberation" through communication. He takes refuge in the thought that perhaps communication is not that powerful after all, and despairing over its present state may mean ascribing it undue influence.
"The representation of reality cannot be mistaken for reality itself....But the course of events proceeds whatever its representation, exclusion or distortion. And it is the course of events that are in command today. Not communication about them."

It appears that at this time, confounded by events, Schiller has no further solutions to offer.

**Group II Answers**

In the verbal arena on international information flows, the United States finds itself in the role of defending the status quo. Classical Liberalists like Merrill would have little to suggest towards a new information order that he would consider superfluous, even if he deigned to recognize it. Its official position at international meetings might be a gauge of how the United States would address a problem whose causes it sees as being internal to a country. U.S. Ambassador John Reinhardt, at the 1978 Unesco General Conference, speaks of

"a more effective program of action including American assistance, both public and private, to suitable identified centers of professional education and training in broadcasting and journalism in the developing world...as well as a major effort to apply the benefits of advanced communication technology - specifically communications satellites - to economic and social needs in the rural areas of developing nations." (quoted from C. Hamelink)
In other words, training of Third World communicators and the use of high technology, or, as Lent puts it, an "old (in new garb) paradigm of development."

**Group III Answers**

For more concrete and novel measures, we must refer to the middle road ideas of concerned nationals in affected countries or to sympathizers in Unesco and in the developed countries including the United States. The following is a rundown of some of them, without regard to order, classification, elaboration, or attribution:

1. Legislation designed to regulate media material imports and, conversely, the outflow of data for computerized data bases. In Canada, broadcasters are asked to spend at least 55 percent of their transmission time on programs which are Canadian in content.

2. Creation of regional and national press agencies, services and pools. The Inter Press Service (IPS) was successfully set up by Latin American and European journalists as an alternative news service emphasizing analysis, interpretation and development news. Depthnews in Asia has a similar aim. Two new regional agencies are the Caribbean News Agency, and the Pan African News Agency.
3. Creation of national communications policy councils to systematize government and private planning for educational and social change. This Unesco proposal has not prospered because of mutual suspicions among individual countries.

4. Organization of local and professional groups whose goal is to revive or initiate indigenous cultural and art forms. In Cuba and the Philippines, theater groups have been organized in the rural areas.

5. Wider use of radio and local or small media whose operation and programming the community can participate in or run.

6. Regional cooperation in media production, such as the television program exchange between Eurovision and Intervision.

7. Cutting down of broadcast hours to lessen the pressure of filling up airtime.

8. Modification of the mainly commercial broadcast system in many Asian countries to allow more pluralism.

9. Designing of an internally differentiated but integrated media structure to end oligopolistic commercial competition.

10. Regrounding of media professionals in their own cultures.
I began by saying that everything that can possibly be said has been said about international flows. The types and methods of research that might shed light on the complex of problems involved have not escaped attention. All the major actors in the three-decade drama have at one time or another endorsed the guidance that research can offer. Opinion divides on what to ask and how.

In question for some time now is the applicability to development communication research of assumptions, models, conceptual frameworks, and methodologies derived from the West, again chiefly from the United States. If, as Tunstall pronounces, the media are American, so, it seems, are most of its research conventions, which Third World researchers have indiscriminately borrowed.

Halloran chides concerned researchers for making "the right noises" about the inadequacies but failing to recognize the underlying causes which they must face up to. There is a worthy challenge for the participants of this seminar. Is it possible, as Lent asks, "to reinvent research conceptualizations and methodologies" that will apply specifically to the Third World? Two years before, Katz had similarly declared
that perhaps radio and television need to be reinvented so that Third World tradition can be translated into the language of broadcast media. Note that these are questions addressed to both communication practitioner and researcher.

A Schiller thesis is that technology is never neutral or value-free. That this idea is no longer startling to many is probably a measure of how the dependency theory has permeated intellectual thought. If technology for development is never neutral, neither is research on development. It is done from some value-infused perspective on how development is expected to happen. For that process to become clearer, researchers have to ask the right questions, and that they will not hope to do if their perspective is flawed. The statement holds for development communication researchers as well.

The issue of administrative versus critical research is one of long-standing in circles where research is treated as a motherhood concept. Should research work within the established system and make it more efficient? Or should it take a critical posture and try to get at root causes? Relative to international flows, the research that our Groups I and II will lean towards is fairly obvious. Since there have
been far too many audience studies, opinion polls, strategy evaluations and SMCR studies and too, little research of the critical kind, communication researchers in Asia might now want to correct the imbalance.

Halloran gives us a sample list of critical research topics to choose from:

"media ownership and control, the formulation of communication policy, decision making in policy formulation, journalistic values, qualitative analyses of content, the agenda setting function of the media, the role of the media in the formation of social consciousness, the relationship between the media and other institutions, and between the communication process and other processes, about international communication patterns, inequalities, imbalance, exploitation and the erosion of cultural and national identities...."

To these might be added experiments on new communication forms, structures, and financing and time series studies to show change in behavior over time.

On the ascendance are qualitative research methods that aim for a holistic view of a system at some expense to the analysis of component parts. A number of researchers look forward to other, still to be developed, methods that will prove equal to the interlocking problems in international flows.
Much more has been said about the international flow of media materials than this paper has covered. And it appears that more is forthcoming. A lot of people seem determined to keep alive the goals of a new international information order even if at Unesco the idea is officially dead. Let us hope that some of them are present at this seminar.
References


